

Rush to judgment

REAL ID ACT

Sen. Bob Bennett should step in to rein in legislation

As its name suggests, the purpose of the REAL ID Act is to create standards for state driver licenses nationwide and prevent identity fraud. It grew out of 9-11 and the desire to make sure that people are who their ID says they are when they get on an airplane.

If that were all the REAL ID Act were about, it would not be so controversial. But the bill, which is now before a conference committee of the Congress, does much more. It affects standards of evidence for asylum-seekers, obliges states to participate in a unified driver license database, and even gives the Department of Homeland Security carte blanche to finish a security fence on the border with Mexico near San Diego.

This far-reaching legislation is so covered in thorns, in fact, that it almost sank passage of the bill to reform U.S. intelligence agencies last year. It had to be dropped from that bill in order for intelligence reform to win Senate approval.

Now it's back, attached to a supplemental appropriations bill to provide money to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to provide tsunami relief.

Only the logic of congressional log-rolling would tie REAL ID to those causes.

In fact, there's no logic to this.

The conference committee should strip the REAL ID provisions from the appropriations bill so that the House and Senate can give them the independent consideration they deserve. Neither chamber has conducted hearings on the REAL ID measures.

As Sen. Robert Bennett of Utah is a member of the conference committee, he should help that stripping effort along.

As we have argued before, we support the REAL ID Act's intention to set federal standards for state driver licenses that are considered acceptable ID for federal purposes. Utah's Legislature changed the state's driver license law earlier this year in anticipation of the federal bill's passage. The new Utah law provides that undocumented aliens may obtain driver permits, but not driver licenses. The permits are not valid ID for government purposes.

We realize that this singles out illegal aliens and may discourage them from taking driver training and buying auto insurance. But what the nation really needs is wholesale immigration reform, including a sensible guest worker program, and it is absurd that the Congress and the president keep dodging the issue.

In the meantime, rushing to judgment on the ill-considered REAL ID Act is no improvement.