

Roll Call

GOP senators propose \$10 minimum wage, mandatory E-Verify

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Bill by Romney, Cotton would gradually hike wages and seeks to prevent employers from hiring undocumented workers

Republican Sens. Mitt Romney and Tom Cotton are proposing legislation that would gradually raise the federal minimum wage to \$10 per hour and require all employers to use E-Verify, an electronic system to check employees' work authorization.

The bill would increase the hourly minimum wage from the current \$7.25 to \$10 by 2025, after which it would adjust with inflation every two years. The increases would not take effect until after the COVID-19 emergency, and small businesses could have a longer phase-in period, according to a fact sheet released by the senators on Tuesday.

The boosted labor protections — which fall short of Democrats' proposed minimum wage increase — would be paired with mandatory E-Verify in an effort to crack down on businesses that hire unauthorized immigrants and to protect low-wage American workers.

It would also raise penalties on employers who hire unauthorized immigrants.

“American workers today compete against millions of illegal immigrants for too few jobs with wages that are too low—that’s unfair,” Cotton, R-Ark., said in a statement Tuesday. “Ending the black market for illegal labor will open up jobs for Americans. Raising the minimum wage will allow Americans filling those jobs to better support their families. Our bill does both.”

Romney, R-Utah, added that the bill “would raise the floor for workers without costing jobs.”

Text of the bill was not available Tuesday. A spokesperson for Cotton said the legislation is slated to be formally introduced Thursday.

The Republican-led effort comes as congressional Democrats push to double the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2025 in a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill.

The House Budget Committee advanced the bill on Monday. It faces tougher odds in the Senate, where Democrats are hoping to muscle the package through the reconciliation process, which allows bills to pass with a simple majority.

To do this, assuming all Republicans vote against the measure, Democrats would need the support of every senator in their party. However, two more moderate members — Sen. Kyrsten

Sinema, D-Ariz., and Sen. Joe Manchin III, D-W.V. — have opposed raising the minimum wage to \$15 through reconciliation.

Spokespeople for Sinema and Manchin didn't immediately respond to requests for comment Tuesday on whether the senators would support Romney and Cotton's minimum wage proposal. A spokesperson for Senate Budget Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who introduced the Democrats' minimum wage hike, also didn't respond to a comment request.

Romney told reporters on Tuesday that if the Democrats' desired \$15 minimum wage hike doesn't pass, lawmakers will "need to sit down and work on a bipartisan proposal."

"We're open to considering other people's points of view. But I think the recognition that we need to raise the minimum wage and tie it to an inflator makes sense," he said. "I think linking that with a system that enforces our immigration laws and prevents people from coming here illegally, and taking away jobs from people at the entry level of our economy, it makes a lot of sense."

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, told CQ Roll Call that Romney and Cotton's bill would be "dead on arrival as is" in the Democrat-controlled chamber. He also called the bill a "bad economic proposal" that would increase costs on employers and on the government.

However, the bill could foreshadow future legislation that exchanges immigration policy changes for labor protections for U.S. workers, he said.

In the White House-backed comprehensive immigration bill put forth last week, Democrats proposed creating a path to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers, while also setting labor protections that would require agricultural employers to pay farmworkers time-and-a-half for overtime work.

"Any time you have Republicans proposing something that's moving in the direction of a Democratic priority, you always have to assume that that's going to give it a higher chance than something that's just a purely Republican-only idea," Bier said.