



Guam weighs in on foreign labor bill

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Amid recent tensions over foreign labor policies in U.S. territories, a new proposal has emerged that could pave the way for individual state governance over non-immigrant foreign labor.

Earlier this month, Sen. Ron Johnson introduced the State-Sponsored Visa Pilot Program Act, a measure that would allow states to individually manage worker immigration, as opposed to a "one-size-fits-all" federal policy.

"The (current) approach is ill equipped to address the diverse needs of the states. It is simply an impossible task for Congress to determine the economic demands in every corner of the country," immigration policy analyst David Bier stated in a Cato Institute article. "Congress has made no major reforms to the immigration system – no temporary worker visa for year-round, lower-skilled jobs, and barely any increase in the high-skilled worker programs."

The bill, as introduced, makes no mention of Guam or the other non-self-governing territories, but could hint at future prospects.

On Friday, labor officials brought up the issue of bottle-necked H-2B worker visas, the result of continental policies that don't meet the needs of the territories.

While the cost of bringing H-2B workers to Guam to fill local jobs can be higher than paying Guam workers, Guam Department of Labor Director Sam Mabini said the island has relied on off-island workers to do jobs that are difficult to fill locally.

Guam has had nearly zero approvals of H-2B visa petitions since last year. The matter has had a negative impact on the local construction industry, driving up the cost of labor and causing delays in some projects, Post files state.

Some residents, like Jesse Torres, feel Johnson's measure, and similar like-minded policies, could be beneficial to Guam to an extent.

"I think it's fine as long as the dependence on foreign workers gets reduced every year," Torres said. "Ultimately, we need to invest more in our own local workforce."

H-2B workers are often hired as carpenters, masons and iron workers, according to Greg Massey, administrator of Alien Labor Processing and Certification at the Guam Department of Labor.

"Those jobs are the really hot, strenuous outside work. And, it's very difficult these days to get U.S. workers, local workers, to fill those jobs," Massey said.

Similar to Torres, Massey said in order to prepare for the military buildup and similar large-scale projects, there needs to be a greater effort to attract and train the next generation of local workers in these skill areas.

The bill also explicitly states state-sponsored non-immigrant workers would not be eligible for any benefits, including family assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or Medicaid. But they will be subject to federal taxes.

"Over the first decade of the program, non-immigrant workers who work for three years will pay \$105.3 billion," Bier writes.

That number jumps to an estimated \$150.7 billion if a majority of foreign workers work for at least five years before returning to their home countries.

Gov. Eddie Calvo recently retracted his support for the buildup over the H-2B visa denials. His office did not respond as of press time.