

The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, Rep. John Curtis pitch bill focused more on a ‘gate’ for immigrant workers than on a border wall

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February 8, 2020

States need workers. Foreign workers want jobs.

And America’s immigration visa system is standing between the two, placing a burden on businesses in states like Utah that rely on seasonal help and blocking those who want to enter the United States legally to do the work.

“Now, imagine being a small business owner with this problem and knowing that there is a pool of talented, hardworking, law-abiding, tax-paying people who would die to have one of their jobs and work hard for them,” said Rep. John Curtis, R-Utah, on Friday.

Curtis joined Gov. Gary Herbert at a discussion hosted by the libertarian Cato Institute about the need for legislation like a bill introduced by Curtis that would create a pilot program for states to get three-year visas for foreign workers in a flexible way based on regional need.

Curtis said the federal government has “failed, and not just a little bit” in fixing a broken immigration system and states are suffering.

“In many ways this failure is predictable,” Curtis said, noting that a one-size-fits-all approach to immigration visas for foreign workers doesn't match up with the diverse needs of states across the country.

“Imagine the difference between Hawaii and Utah,” Curtis said. “They need surfers; we need skiers. Each state had unique needs.”

Herbert said that elected officials have for too long “weaponized” immigration for political purposes instead of trying to solve the problem. That’s left out in the cold states like Utah, which has the lowest unemployment rate in the country and relies on seasonal workers for farms and the ski industry as well as highly skilled workers for a growing tech sector.

“We need to talk less about the wall and more about the gate,” Herbert said.

Curtis’ State Sponsored Program Act of 2019 does not yet have any cosponsors, though Curtis said he’s getting more traction from fellow members of Congress who see it as a good solution.