



U.S. wants to allow more foreign workers while limiting immigration

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April 8, 2019

The federal government wants to issue more visas for foreign workers to take temporary jobs in housekeeping, landscaping and other fields — even as President Donald Trump seeks to seal off the border with Mexico, where most of those workers come from.

The departments of Homeland Security and Labor said they planned to issue up to 30,000 additional H-2B visas through Sept. 30, the end of the federal fiscal year. Congress has generally capped the number of visas, which businesses compete for, at 66,000, divided evenly between summer and winter seasons.

Only workers who had previously secured the visas would be eligible for the proposed additional ones.

The visas provide legal status for immigrants in temporary nonfarm jobs with landscaping companies, restaurants, hotels and amusement parks, among other industries.

Last fiscal year, about 75 percent of these visas were issued to workers from Mexico, according to State Department data. Visas were also issued to, among others, Jamaicans, Guatemalans and South Africans.

Business groups regularly push lawmakers to raise or eliminate the cap on the number of visas issued, a demand that has increased as unemployment has dropped and domestic workers have become more scarce.

The government's move to expand the H-2B program appeared inconsistent with the Trump administration's repeated message about a crisis on the southwestern border of the United States. On Saturday, Trump told a gathering of the Republican Jewish Coalition that "our country's full."

"What can we do? We can't handle any more," he said. "Our country's full. You can't come in, I'm sorry."

Alex Nowrasteh, a senior immigration analyst with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said there were "a lot of contradictions" within the government's proposals.

“On one hand, we need more people because the economy is booming,” he said. “Then on the other hand, to say, ‘The country is full, go back’ — it’s impossible to reconcile those.”

The H-2B visa program, which started in the mid-20th century, has been a feature of a persistent debate over using foreign workers for seasonal labor.

Unions and immigration opponents argue that hiring H-2B workers suppresses wages and deprives Americans of jobs. Advocacy groups say foreign workers are often exploited and employers say the cap encourages businesses to hire workers who are in the country illegally.

Andrea Palermo, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, did not directly answer questions about what was behind the plan for additional H-2B visas. She also did not address questions about the apparent contradiction in the administration’s positions.

“Congress — not DHS — should be responsible for determining whether the annual numerical limitations for H-2B workers set by Congress need to be modified and by how much, and for setting parameters to ensure that enough workers are available to meet employers’ temporary needs throughout the year,” she said.

The White House did not immediately respond to requests for comment Sunday.

Nowrasteh said he favored the H-2B program.

“I think the economic benefits from the H-2B visa are very large, the benefits to the workers are huge,” he said.

Because businesses are required to show that no American workers want the jobs, the cap “makes no sense,” he said.

“If they try to hire Americans and Americans don’t want to do that job, then there should be no cap,” he said.

Nowrasteh said he believed that H-2B visas for Mexican workers have helped drive down illegal immigration. He said expanding the program or eliminating the cap could also help reduce the number of immigrants in the country illegally from Central American countries.

Last month a bipartisan group of senators, led by Republican Susan Collins and independent Angus King of Maine, asked the Department of Homeland Security to increase the number of visas as a way to support small businesses in a tight labor market, especially those preparing for the summer season.

“In the short run, many areas of our country simply lack the working-age population needed to meet the demand for seasonal jobs,” the senators wrote in a letter signed by 11 lawmakers. “In some industries, particularly tourism, we fear that the demand for workers so far outstrips the available supply that businesses could be forced to curtail operations, putting at risk the jobs of American workers who fill year-round positions at these establishments.”

But Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports curbs on immigration, was critical of the program and said it enabled “businesses to avoid hiring people they’d rather not hire.”

“A nation with a third of a billion spanning an entire continent, with 50 million working-age people not in the labor force, doesn’t need to be importing labor,” he said.

Krikorian said the proposed expansion of the program was not “backtracking or flip-flopping” by the administration.

“The president has always been a big fan of these guest worker visas,” said Krikorian, who noted that Trump’s properties, such as Mar-a-Lago, use this visa program to hire workers.