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## Rep. Ken Buck says his visa bill is focused on labor reality, not fear

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Colorado Republican U.S. Rep. Ken Buck is working on the House version of a foreign guest-worker visa program its Senate sponsor admits will likely make them both "lightning rods" in the white-hot debate over imported labor.

But with Colorado's unemployment rate at a best-in-the-nation low of 2.3 percent in April, Buck says it's time for a common-sense work-visa program that provides some labor certainty for Colorado tech and agriculture companies.

"Overall, the immigration debate is driven in large measure by fear and not reality, and the reality in this situation is that we need a strong and vibrant workforce," Buck told a recent gathering of the libertarian CATO Institute in Washington, D.C.

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., who already introduced the upper chamber version of the state sponsored Visa Pilot Program Act of 2017, called Buck the "hero of the moment" for agreeing to carry the House version, although it still has not been introduced.

"I particularly want to thank Congressman Buck for working with us and, let's face it, having the courage," Johnson said at the May 3 CATO event. "We'll probably be a lightning rod on this bill, but with the support of groups like CATO, we'll hopefully enact some common-sense policies — a first step, a pilot step, in fixing our very broken immigration systems."

The bill would amend the federal Immigration and Nationality Act to allow states to admit "an alien who is sponsored by a state and who is coming temporarily to the United States to reside in the state to perform services, provide capital investment, direct the operations of an enterprise or otherwise contribute to the economic development agenda of the state ...."

The state-sponsored program would be tracked and administered by the state and also would require legislative action by the Colorado General Assembly. Buck said he's discussed the bill with Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper but wanted to "get further along" before taking it to state lawmakers. The proposed system would be in addition to existing federal work-visa programs.

Buck, the former Weld district attorney who now serves on the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security, said he wants to work on the wording more before floating the House version of the bill.

"I'm not ready to sponsor the bill in the House yet," Buck said at the CATO event. "I think it can be even better. Having witnessed the [American] Health Care Act, I think it's important to take the bill out of the oven when it is baked, so I'm going to continue to work on it."

Buck was referring to the controversial House version of the AHCA, a bill he voted in favor of currently being considered by the Senate and will likely see significant changes.

Buck spokesman Kyle Huwa said the congressman is still tinkering with the state-sponsored visa bill, though he did not have specific details about what aspects of the Senate bill might change.

"So, right now, [Rep. Buck] is still working out the final details of the bill and hopes to move forward with it soon," Huwa said. "Congressman Buck doesn't have a final version of his bill yet, but he is working with a number of different groups to craft a solution. He doesn't plan to introduce the same bill as Sen. Johnson."

Buck said he is cognizant of national sentiment American workers need to come first, but added his bill would allow states to control the process — determining labor needs in industry sectors being constrained by a lack of qualified employees. Still, he added, the federal government would continue to control the overall immigration process.

"This is a conservative issue," Buck said. "Sen. Johnson is going to lead the conservative charge in the Senate, and I plan on leading it in the House. Giving power to the states is a conservative model for how we go forward in education, how we go forward in transportation, I think health care, and also in this area, in immigration."

Buck added the state's agriculture and high-tech sectors would likely benefit the most from his bill, if it passes. His vast 4th Congressional District in eastern Colorado is highly agrarian but also abuts the booming tech corridor along the state's northern Front Range.

"Colorado is attracting a lot of high-tech businesses right now," Buck said. "The University of Colorado and other universities in Colorado are training a number of foreign-born students in engineering and other skill sets that are needed in those businesses, and so I can see a partnership between our public and private universities, our employers, and this program."

One of the groups supporting the Johnson bill is the tech-industry lobby FWD.us, which originated in California's Silicon Valley but has regional representation in Colorado.

"The Johnson-Buck bill is an innovative and thoughtful conservative approach to immigration to fit the needs of local economies," FWD.us campaign manager Rob Jesmer said in a prepared statement.

"Giving state officials a greater say in how best to meet their local workforce needs through a flexible and fair guest-worker program will help fill labor gaps in local economies and improve border security by providing additional avenues for businesses to legally hire temporary workers," Jesmer added.

Other supporters of Johnson's bill include business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Dairy Coalition and the National Association of Home Builders.