



House Republicans Push For Lifting Seasonal Worker Visa Cap

By Patrick Yoest, Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

WASHINGTON -(Dow Jones)- Republican lawmakers called for Congress to lift a visa cap for returning seasonal workers in order help small businesses.

Led by Rep. Charles Boustany, R-La., some House Republicans are seeking signatures Tuesday to force consideration of a bill that would exempt returning seasonal workers from a cap on H-2B visas. The federal government's H-2B program applies to foreign workers who are seeking temporary legal status for work in the U.S.

The bill has 146 co-sponsors, but Boustany said he is uncertain how many will sign on to the discharge petition. The petition must have 218 signatures to force floor debate on the bill.

The lawmakers say that the current cap strains businesses in sectors ranging from agriculture to construction. Boustany said that House Democratic leaders, along with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, have stalled action on the bill.

"They're applying pressure on their rank-and-file members to hold off because there may be a compromise," Boustany said. "But in the meantime, as the weeks go by, our small businesses are facing increasing stress and many of them are possibly going out of business."

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., would exempt workers who have held H-2B visas from the H-2B cap. This year's cap of 66,000 H-2B visas was reached in early January, according to Republicans.

Stupak himself told Congress Daily on Monday that he would not sign the discharge petition and would continue discussions with Democratic leadership on the issue.

Republicans are not uniformly in support of bringing up Stupak's legislation either. They have shown more support for improved border enforcement, which many say must be a predecessor to measures allowing expanded immigration.

But lawmakers in favor of the discharge petition said that, with or without tightened borders, seasonal jobs would go unfilled if the cap is not lifted.

"They're two different issues, and I think most folks in my area can differentiate," said Rep. Jim Gerlach, R-Pa., a supporter of the discharge petition.

House Republican Conference Chairman Adam Putnam, R-Fla., also appeared with Gerlach and Boustany on Tuesday.

Republican leaders also have pushed a discharge petition for a bill sponsored by Rep. Heath Shuler, D-N.C., that would require stronger border enforcement. But they are still more than 30 signatures short of the necessary 218 signatures on that bill.

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