



Lobbyists eye smaller immigration bills

By Kevin Bogardus

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Lobbyists are pressing Congress to pass smaller, targeted immigration measures to help a variety of industries, sensing that a broader solution is unlikely in an election year.

Already, lawmakers are considering about a half-dozen bills to deal with smaller issues, many of them addressing jobs that are primarily filled by immigrant labor.

The increased attention to rifle-shot bills comes one year after the Senate failed to move comprehensive immigration legislation that would have combined new border security and enforcement measures with a temporary-worker program and a plan to allow many of the 12 million illegal immigrants to stay, work and earn a path to citizenship.

With a variety of ideas moving — from making an employee verification process mandatory to increasing the number of high-tech visas issued each year — lobbyists from the coalitions backing the comprehensive bill are keeping an eye on each other to see who gets what.

If one sector gets attention on Capitol Hill, expect the others to make their case.

“If they are going to seek a fix, we are going to be right there with them seeking a fix as well, and vice versa,” said Robert Hoffman, Oracle’s vice president of government and public affairs.

As co-chairman of [Compete America](#), a coalition of tech companies, Hoffman was involved heavily in last year’s immigration debate. Moreover, his company has been acutely affected by that battle.

Eight percent of Oracle’s U.S. workforce, about 2,500 employees, is in the country on an H-1B visa, awarded to high-skilled workers such as the company’s foreign scientists and engineers. But with the official cap at 65,000, the U.S. government has already handed out the maximum amount of visas this year, potentially leading to layoffs or jobs moving overseas for Oracle.

“We are losing people. We had to let go of people we would rather keep who then go to our competitors,” said Hoffman. “That’s an opportunity cost.”

Oracle still has about 1,000 jobs it wants to fill here in America, said Hoffman.

In addition, much smaller and start-up tech companies might not stay in the U.S. if they cannot employ a legal workforce, said Hoffman.

Hoffman is tracking a series of bills sponsored by Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) that would ease pressure on the H-1B visa system. One would release more green cards and another would remove the cap that limits the number of immigrants from individual countries.

Lofgren, whose district is based in the tech epicenter of Silicon Valley, is also working on a bill that would help foreign math or science students attending U.S. colleges stay in the country if they receive a job offer and possibly earn a green card, according to a House aide.

Lobbyists are looking beyond prominent Democrats for help by seeking the backing of Republicans, too. One of those members is Rep. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (Wis.), the former House Judiciary chairman who sponsored a controversial border security and enforcement bill in the 109th Congress that would have made being in the country illegally a felony charge.

But the piecemeal approach to immigration reform may crumble under its own weight, as each industry presses for its own priority.

“It’s hard to do anything for anyone without doing everything for everybody. That sounds like a formula for doing nothing,” said former Rep. Bruce Morrison (D-Conn.). Concerns over illegal immigration infect every corner of the immigration debate, said Morrison, and decrease the chances of significant legislation passing.

As a Democratic Connecticut congressman, Morrison was a prime player in the immigration battles of the 1980s.

Now he is lobbying for the [American Hospital Association](#), seeking a measure that would help foreign nurses to stay in the country.

The provision would allow the federal government to issue additional green cards for immigrant nurses as well as provide funding to train domestic nurses — due to an agreement struck with nursing unions. Having already passed the Senate last fall, Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.) and Sensenbrenner introduced a similar measure in the House last week.

Lobbyists who did not see their clients’ interests represented in last year’s failed immigration reform bill are now looking for more targeted bills this year. For example, a number of trade associations affiliated with the human resource industry are lobbying for a new employee verification system.

“Employers want an effective, efficient, truly electronic, mandated system. Unfortunately, E-Verify does not meet those requirements,” said Mike Aitken, director of governmental affairs for the Society for Human Resource Management.

Aitken and others are seeking to replace E-Verify — the U.S. government’s system of identifying employees allowed to work here — with a system that is less prone to error and that would combat identity theft.

Their best option is legislation sponsored by Sen. Sam Johnson (R-Texas) that would create a new verification system if passed. The House Ways and Means Social Security subcommittee held a hearing on the bill Tuesday.

Lobbyists are hoping lawmakers will again take up the issue of seasonal workers. A measure that would remove restrictions on returning H-2B visa workers for five years was included in last year’s failed immigration package.

Now, lobbyists are looking to specific pieces of legislation to do the same.

Shawn McBurney, senior vice president of governmental affairs for the [American Hotel and Lodging Association](#), said that the limited number of H-2B visas gives companies that obey the law a competitive disadvantage.

“They go through all this effort to obey the law by not hiring undocumented workers and then they get punished for doing so. They are competing against people who do,” said McBurney.

McBurney and others are watching legislation sponsored by Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) and Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich.). Mikulski’s bill has not moved since January 2007, but there are 30 members signing a discharge petition to bring Stupak’s measure to the House floor.