

Subj: **Congress Passes High-Tech Visa Bill**
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Congress Passes High-Tech Visa Bill

By **BART JANSEN**
.c The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) - High-tech companies could bring in almost 600,000 additional skilled foreign workers over the next three years under a bill that sped through Congress on Tuesday.

The Senate passed the bill on a 96-1 vote, and the House followed with voice vote passage several hours later, abandoning a version of its own that met serious opposition from the technology industry.

The quick congressional action after nine months of jockeying fulfills an election-year promise by both Democratic and Republican leaders to a high-tech sector that is increasingly flexing its political muscle through lobbying and campaign donations to both parties. President Clinton has said he will sign it.

"We should pass the bill just as it is," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif. "It's the best bill that's been considered yet."

Lofgren had co-sponsored a similar bill with Rep. David Dreier, R-Calif., that had stalled in the House in favor of a version that had more protections for American high-tech workers.

With U.S. unemployment rates holding steady near a 30-year low, companies in California's Silicon Valley and along other booming high-tech corridors say they need the additional workers with six-year H-1B visas to fuel their continuing rapid growth.

"The short-term problem is how to fill the key positions immediately so that we don't lose opportunities to foreign competitors or so that we don't force American businesses to move offshore to where skilled workers might live," said Sen. Spencer Abraham, R-Mich.

A bill by Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, that was approved by the House Judiciary Committee would have required companies using visas to increase the median pay of their U.S. workers and establish job protections for them. The industry opposed Smith's bill.

Dreier, who chairs the House Rules Committee, called the Senate version "dynamite" and had said earlier that House leaders would find a way to get it passed.

"We can either choose to import workers or export jobs," Dreier said. "We need to do everything that we can to break down government barriers to make sure that that expertise is here."

Industry advocates - including Microsoft and Sun Microsystems, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers - praised the Senate vote and called for the House to follow suit.

"If we want the United States to maintain its technological advantage, employers must be allowed to hire the professionals they need," said Paula Collins, director of government relations for Texas Instruments.

Technology businesses have more than doubled their political contributions during the past two years, according to the independent Center for Responsive Politics. The companies have given candidates \$22.1 million since the start of last year, with Democrats getting a little more than half of that.

Computer software and other high-tech companies contend that 300,000 jobs are going unfilled for a lack of qualified workers. Labor unions, however, argue that the companies want more immigrants to keep down wages of Americans holding the same jobs.

While lifting the ceiling entirely on the H-1B visas, Smith's bill would have required employers to pay the immigrants at least \$40,000 a year and not use them to replace Americans on their payrolls. Companies would also have to document that they have at least \$250,000 in capital to participate in the program.

"Congress should not turn its back on American workers," Smith said Tuesday night. "In return for giving high-tech companies hundreds of thousands of more foreign workers, all we ask ... is some minimal, basic, common-sense safeguards,"

Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, D-S.C., cast the lone vote against the bill. Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.; Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., and Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., did not vote.

The Senate bill would allow the Immigration and Naturalization Service to issue up to 195,000 new H-1B visas annually for the next three years to skilled foreign workers. The bill also would exempt from the cap foreign graduates of U.S. master's or doctoral programs or foreign workers at U.S. colleges, providing another source of labor to high-tech companies.

Exempted from the caps are foreign employees of universities and higher education research facilities. But dropped from the legislation was language in an earlier version that would also have exempted from the ceilings foreign students with graduate degrees from U.S. universities who are subsequently hired by American high-tech companies.

Under present law, the government issued 115,000 H-1B visas during the fiscal year that ended Saturday. With no new legislation the ceiling would fall to 107,500 this year and to 65,000 next year.

Democrats in both chambers said last week they will try to put other immigration measures, which had slowed consideration of the visa bill, on one of the spending bills that Congress must pass before adjourning for the year, under threat of a presidential veto.

The measures include granting amnesty to illegal immigrants who arrived in the United States before 1987 and offering permanent residency to more political refugees from Central America and Haiti.

The bills are S.2045, H.R. 3183 and H.R. 4227.

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