

High-Tech Visa Plan Dropped From Bill

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WASHINGTON - A Senate-passed measure to add more visas for foreign workers in high-tech and specialty fields was dropped from a budget bill that passed the House early Monday, disappointing high-tech and manufacturing firms in search of skilled workers.

The Senate plan would have allowed 30,000 more of the popular H1-B visas each year, and increased fees for those visas to help trim the budget deficit. Congress capped the six-year H-1B visas at 65,000 per year in 2004, and that cap has already been reached for the 2006 fiscal year that began Oct. 1.

The Senate language also would have allowed 90,000 more employment-based green cards that offer permanent residency to skilled workers, and added fees for those.

Critics contend the visas give foreigners high-level jobs that should go to American workers, and the plan was opposed by some House Republicans as a backdoor way to boost immigration. House and Senate negotiators left it out of the final version of a \$39.7 billion federal budget bill that passed the House 212-206 and was expected to get a Senate vote later in the day.

"This is very, very disappointing," said Sandy Boyd, a vice president at the National Association of Manufacturers. "What's distressing about this, and what the Senate clearly understood, is there is a real global competition for this work and for these employees, and the question is not whether the work is going to get done, it's where is the work going to get done. We've missed a real opportunity by not ensuring the work would be done here."

House and Senate negotiators also dropped a plan to increase fees on another kind of visa, the L-1, which companies use to transfer workers they already employ in foreign countries to the United States.

The boost to visa availability and fees was meant to achieve budget savings in programs under jurisdiction of the congressional judiciary committees. Instead of using visas, the final version of the bill saves money in judiciary programs by increasing fees for filing lawsuits and filing for bankruptcy.