

The Seattle Times

Customs turns back Russian engineers working for Boeing

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport denied entry Friday to 15 Russian engineers from Boeing's Moscow Design Center and sent them back to Russia.

By [Dominic Gates](#)

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U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport denied entry Friday to 15 Russian engineers from Boeing's Moscow Design Center and sent them back to Russia.

The incident caused the company to suspend U.S. travel for other engineers from Russia "until Boeing can determine the appropriate way to proceed," said spokesman Marc Birtel.

According to the white-collar union at Boeing, the Society for Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), the engineers were not Boeing employees but lower-paid contractors.

The union's communications director, Bill Dugovich, described the denial of entry as "fantastic news."

He said SPEEA has asked the State Department for several years about the validity of Boeing's use of temporary-visitor visas, alleging that Russian contractors violate the terms by working for Boeing while in the U.S.

Boeing's Birtel said the company believes that "the engineers denied entry were traveling with the proper visas."

He said Boeing is working with CBP officials "to determine if additional information may be required for the engineers to be approved for entry in order to prevent a recurrence of this situation in the future."

CBP spokeswoman Jenny Burke, citing privacy laws, said the agency cannot disclose details of a specific case. But she confirmed that "15 people were allowed to withdraw their applications to enter the United States as they had not proven that they were admissible."

Further details on what happened were provided by Rich Plunkett, SPEEA's director of strategic development. During questioning of the engineers on Friday, CBP officer John Hullett called Plunkett to consult about their status.

Plunkett said Hullett told him that the Russians arrived with B-1 visas. In response, Plunkett informed him of the union's longtime concern on the issue.

CBP's Burke said B-1 visas are most commonly issued to foreign businesspeople traveling for purposes of representing their products, taking orders, or attending seminars or training. Visas are issued by the State Department, and CBP enforces the immigration laws at U.S. entry points.

With a B-1 visa, visitors may be admitted to the U.S. for a period of six months to a year. However they are not permitted to do paid work for a U.S. company.

Burke said travelers presenting themselves for entry into the U.S. under a B-1 visa "are subject to an inspection and questioning as to their declared and documented intent for seeking admission."

If through such questioning a B-1 visa visitor "is found to be entering for purposes of engaging in employment, he will be deemed inadmissible," she said.

Plunkett said Hullett told him that under questioning at Sea-Tac at least some of the engineers said that they would be doing work for Boeing during their stay.

"We've had a multitude of reports of these engineers sitting side-by-side with our SPEEA-represented engineers doing the same work," Plunkett said.

SPEEA estimates that Boeing has anywhere from 100 to 300 of these engineers here at a time, most of whom are contractors, not direct Boeing employees. They are paid less than engineers here, Dugovich said.

Boeing's Birtel declined to say how many people the company has here already on B-1 visas.

"Boeing works diligently to comply with all rules and regulations concerning travel to and from the U.S. for its employees and for others who are working on Boeing projects," Birtel said.

A State Department spokeswoman contacted Wednesday afternoon had no immediate comment.

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