

Private sector weighs-in on foreign labor ban



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Federal regulatory decisions continue to fuel a foreign labor shortage here. And while local construction and labor officials are hopeful the multibillion-dollar military buildup will be spared, that might not be the case for the private sector.

Lawmakers hosted an informational hearing where they got an update on the impact of continued federal tightening of the foreign worker programs. The recent move by U.S. Homeland Security to ban H-2B workers from the Philippines is drawing new concerns. Officials say the ban on Filipinos, who unlike other nearby labor sources typically speak English and share a similar culture, will only make things more difficult. DHS removed Filipinos from the program citing a high percentage of overstays.

But Black Construction Vice President Mark Mamczarz said DHS also left Guam an opening.

"That loophole, you created is a huge loophole, and they tell you it," he said. "But nevertheless, you never know when the faucet goes on and when the faucet gets turned off. And so I think it's imperative that we work towards getting that clarified."

The loophole gives U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services the discretion to allow Filipinos to work on projects if it's in the interest of the United States, such as military-related construction. Local officials are also pushing to extend that to outside the fence projects, where most visa approvals continue to be denied.

Meanwhile, the Department of Defense has some \$800 million in construction on the table, and the need for foreign workers is projected to surge in the next few years: 3,400 by Fiscal Year 2021, and 6,700 for Fiscal Year 2022. But the implications for the private sector are sobering, as the costs for outside the fence construction are skyrocketing.

Joe Roberto has been planning to build a retirement home for himself and his wife for the past four years.

"The first estimate four months ago was \$392,000," he said. "Three years ago it was \$200,000 to \$300,000. Just two weeks ago my last estimate was \$448,000. That is reality; that is where we're at today."

Local officials are hoping to convince Washington to change that.