

https://www.postguam.com/news/local/calvo-talks-h--labor-issue-with-feds/article_7f5f2716-fe2f-11e6-aabe-074d9bbdefc1.html

Calvo talks H-2 labor issue with Feds

John O'Connor | The Guam Daily Post Mar 2, 2017 Updated 10 hrs ago



Guam Gov. Eddie Calvo, second from right, meets with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service officials Tuesday in Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the Office of the Governor

Federal immigration's stance on the processing of H-2B visas for foreign workers may cause an "economic catastrophe" on Guam, according to Gov. Eddie Calvo, who met with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service on Tuesday in Washington, D.C.

The governor had been off-island for about a week now as he attended the National Governors'

Association Winter Meeting, during which he took the opportunity to speak with several federal agencies, some of which have seen new faces with the change of the presidency.

According to a release from the Adelup, acting USCIS Director Lori Scialabba asked Calvo to explain the situation on Guam while also seeking an explanation from USCIS staff and attorneys on the position they had taken the past year, which saw the beginning of unprecedented denials for H-2B visa petitions.

Additional workers are needed

The governor explained that Guam's labor force has historically been augmented with foreign workers, the releases stated, and that the local labor department has created policies and processes to protect employers and employees because of this situation. Additional workers are particularly needed today because of Guam's economic growth and need for skilled workers, both in the health care and construction industries, the release added.

“Because of this new interpretation of this policy, we’ve lost specialized health care providers at the new hospital. This limits their services, which means more people to go to our public hospital, which is already busy helping a majority of our population – both locally and regionally,” the governor stated in the release.

“We’ve been told that there’s no change to the labor policies. And yet we’re seeing a record number of rejections – without explanation or recourse for relief ... Your new interpretation on H-2B policy could cause economic catastrophe in Guam.”

Impact from lack of workers

The number of H-2B workers on island has dropped to fewer than 300 compared to about 1,500 last March. This has led to slow progress on certain construction projects, some of which are related to the military buildup.

Local agencies, such as the Department of Public Works and the Guam Waterworks Authority, have also felt some impact from the lack of foreign workers as fewer companies are interested in submitting bids, or are submitting higher-priced bids because of the labor shortage.

During a Feb. 28 status hearing on a permanent injunction placed on the Guam Behavioral Health

and Wellness Center, Director Rey Vega said it had always been a challenge filling nursing vacancies but this is now somewhat compounded by the H-2B issue. Guam's only private hospital had been relying on temporary nurses from the Philippines to augment its staff, but when nurses from that source slowed, it increased competition for local nurses, Vega stated.

"The governor noted that Guam is working on long-term solutions, but this sudden change requires more immediate response. He called on the acting (USCIS) director and her staff to revisit the policy and consider its implications on Guam," the release from Adelup stated.

Oyaol Ngirairiki, the governor's spokeswoman, said USCIS did not make any commitments during the meeting with Calvo, but the administration is hopeful because of how engaged the acting director appeared when Guam issues were presented.