

# Contractors express mixed feelings on sourcing H-2B visa workers from Mexico

Anumita Kaur, Pacific Daily News Published 5:57 a.m. ChT May 8, 2019



In this file photo, carpenter Orlando Del Mundo removes nails from plywood panels as he and other 5M Construction Corporation employees work at a warehouse building project in Tamuning on Tuesday. The island's construction industry faces hard times as the federal government continues to reject most H-2 worker visa applications (Photo: Pacific Marketplace file photo)

[Companies seeking H-2B workers mull the possibility of sourcing from Mexico \(/story/news/local/2019/05/06/contractors-may-consider-h-2-b-visa-workers-mexico/1114947001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/05/06/contractors-may-consider-h-2-b-visa-workers-mexico/1114947001/), while others remain unconvinced.

"I'm very curious," said JMI Edison president Eduardo Ilao. "They have the skills that Guam needs."

The Guam Department of Labor hosted Practical Employee Solutions president Veronica Birkenstock this week to discuss [utilizing Mexico's H-2B workforce \(/story/money/2018/11/14/tsubaki-tower-receives-approval-h-2-b-workers/1993965002/\)](/story/money/2018/11/14/tsubaki-tower-receives-approval-h-2-b-workers/1993965002/) as a solution to the ban on workers from the Philippines. Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero supported exploring this option at an Adelup meeting Tuesday afternoon.

"We are being [delayed and stifled due to the lack of H-2B workers \(/story/money/2019/02/06/h-2-b-bans-have-far-reaching-impact-says-guam-contractors-association/2775204002/\)](/story/money/2019/02/06/h-2-b-bans-have-far-reaching-impact-says-guam-contractors-association/2775204002/)," she said. "If Mexico is willing to work with us, then I'm very open to that."

**More:** [H-2B bans have far-reaching impact, says Guam Contractors Association \(/story/money/2019/02/06/h-2-b-bans-have-far-reaching-impact-says-guam-contractors-association/2775204002/\)](/story/money/2019/02/06/h-2-b-bans-have-far-reaching-impact-says-guam-contractors-association/2775204002/)

Mark Mamczarz, vice president of accounting and finance at Black Construction, is not interested in the option. The company, currently petitioning for 240 workers from the Philippines, sent a representative to the round table.

## Why the language barrier is seen as the main issue

The primary problem is the language barrier, he said.

According to Birkenstock, most of the H-2B workers in Mexico have mainland work experience, so basic English skills are not a large issue. Many people on military bases, accounting for the majority of H-2B projects, speak Spanish as well, she said.

"I have one person out of 500 at Black Construction that speaks Spanish," Mamczarz said. "I do have enough workers that speak Tagalog."

The language barrier can cause problems at multiple levels, despite Birkenstock's reassurance, according to Mamczarz. Interviews for workers in the Philippines can be conducted in Tagalog, thanks to Tagalog-speaking staff.

If the workers in Mexico do not speak English, Mamczarz does not have the Spanish-speaking staff to properly conduct interviews to hire workers from Mexico.



In this Oct. 4, 2016, file photo, carpenter Negs Barrozo prepares to fasten lumber together into a form, as he and other 5M Construction Corporation employees work at a building project in Tamuning. A near 100-percent rejection rate for Guam H-2 worker visa applications has short- and long-term implications for the island's construction industry. Carpenter Negs Barrozo prepares to fasten lumber together into a form, as he and other 5M Construction Corporation employees, work at a building project in Tamuning on Tuesday, Oct. 4. 5M is one of a dozen Guam businesses that sued the federal government over worker visas. (Photo: Pacific Marketplace file photo)

If that hurdle is surpassed, the language barrier can become a safety problem later, Mamczarz said, as an inability to communicate well threatens on-site safety.

In addition, a large Filipino population already exists on Guam, aiding in the Filipino workers' experience. This will be another gap for workers from Mexico, he said.

The process to source from the Philippines is now a nuisance riddled with delay, however, the language barrier is enough for Mamczarz to continue sourcing from the Philippines, and simply hope for the ban to be overturned.

"It is more difficult to bring them in now, you have to have the name list upfront," he said. "There's pros and cons, but it's going to take me a lot to walk away from the Philippines."

The language and cultural barriers are not impossible to overcome, Ilao said, and Mexico may be a viable option for sourcing workers. JMI Edison representatives also attended the round table. His company is currently seeking about 20 H-2B employees.

"There will always be a language concern," Ilao said. "She will prioritize workers with experience in the U.S."

Given that many H-2B workers in Mexico have worked on mainland projects, the English language issue seems manageable, he said.

"I think it's feasible," Ilao said. "We will be considering it. I just have some questions."

## How much will it cost?

Cost is the primary question, Ilao said, including the rates of Birkenstock's firm and airfare.

"The major difference will be the plane ticket," Ilao said. "However, it could be worth it. Especially if we could get a three-year contract signed. I'm not paying for transportation every year."

Birkenstock stated that if Guam companies tapped into Mexico's H-2B worker population, a deal can be negotiated with an airline to reduce airfare costs.

Verifying the workers' skill may also incur costs, Ilao said, compounding the cost of bringing workers to Guam with sending company representatives to Mexico.

"I need to verify if they are really skilled, and to do that I'd have to do a trade test, witness it myself," he said. "How much would that cost?"

Mamczarz is skeptical of the skill sets available.

The types of H-2B employment most common in the mainland are seasonal workers, often related to hospitality or landscaping, Mamczarz said, not necessarily those in construction.

"They use seasonality for their temporary need workers," he said. "We've never used seasonality. The construction industry's use is minimal at best."

Particularly due to the high cost of airfare, an assurance that the workers being brought in are skilled is absolutely necessary, Ilao said.

"The price is just the challenge there," Ilao said. "But I've always had the idea of workers from Mexico. They're very highly skilled."

Dept. of Labor director David Dell'Isola urged this week to prioritize diversification of Guam's workforce, stating that it is important for Guam to not rely on a single country for workers.

While Ilao is considering workers from Mexico while the Philippines ban is in effect, neither Ilao nor Mamczarz are concerned with diversifying their workforce for diversity's sake.

Ultimately, the Philippines is the most convenient and understood route, both Ilao and Mamczarz said.

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