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## Guam H-2B worker drought ending at least for military

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**Guam DOL's Greg Massey and Director Sam Mabini**

The Guam Department of Labor has confirmed the approvals of 162 H-2B petitions for defense projects — the first of the 4,000 alien work visa slots authorized for Guam under the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act.

The approved H-2B petitions are for PHC Corp. that will fill the following positions: carpenter (128) construction equipment mechanic (5), electrician (7), plumber (8) and welder (14).

Greg Massey, administrator of the Guam Department of Labor's Alien Labor Processing and Certificate Division, said it's the first such approval since November 2016.

There remaining 171 positions for three occupations that require USCIS approval for PHC Corporation: cement masons, heavy equipment operators, and iron workers. Guam DOL officials anticipate an update on those 171 next week.

The authorized issuance of 4,000 H-2B visas does not apply to civilian projects beyond the defense.

Just the same, Gov. Eddie Calvo welcomed the approval of the first set of petitions. "This is good news," he said. "This is the first test case of the NDAA visa approval process and we weren't certain how USCIS would respond to these petitions."

Massey and Guam Labor Director Sam Mabini are waiting USCIS' response to other petitions that have been submitted by other local contractors to see if there's a positive trend. Massey said the numbers for H2B workers in prior years has averaged about 1,500.

"The second big test would be the federal agency's response to petitions for skilled workers for outside-the-fence projects," Calvo said. "Just this week, I signed a petition for the first of those projects by a contractor that was involved in the GCA lawsuit."

The governor is referring to the Ace Builders petition for 555 skilled workers. His letter of support will be added to the petition packet that will be sent to USCIS.

At te Guam Industry Forum last last month, Calvo reiterated his pullout of support for the military buildup on Guam. “At this point I can’t support the buildup until the immediate immigration mandates applied to Guam are seriously adjusted to reflect equity and calculation and access to foreign workers to build Guam’s infrastructure,” Calvo said at the forum.

Meanwhile, Guam Delegate to Congress Madeleine Z. Bordallo reacted to the latest federal move:

“I am pleased USCIS has begun approving H2-B visas for Guam businesses. This is exactly what my provision in last year’s defense bill was intended to do, and it is encouraging that our local companies are beginning to see the benefits of this federal law. I continue working in Congress to expand on this authority and provide a full solution for our entire island. I am confident the recent visa approvals will benefit civilian and military projects related to the buildup inside and outside the fence. This is just the start, and I look forward to more approvals in the near future.”

The \$8 billion military buildup on Guam, which has been delayed many times, is on track to begin by 2024, Rear Adm. Soshana Chatfield, commander of Joint Region Marianas, said at the forum. Military investments have been pouring into Guam and the government of Japan has turned over its \$2.8 billion share of the relocation cost, according to Kazuhiro Watanabe, vice chairman of Japan Society of Defense Facility Engineers. The Department of Defense has approved \$354 million in military construction on Guam for this year. Guam’s delegate to Congress, Madeleine Bordallo, said about \$375 million in projects are expected to be approved next year.

The current labor pool on Guam, Calvo said, is hardly sufficient to perform an estimated \$5.5 billion worth civilian construction work during the next five years. According to local labor officials, there are less than 100 H2-B workers left on Guam — from more than 1,400 two years ago.

While Guam may be familiar with acute labor shortages, the past two years have been particularly taxing for an island that is largely dependent on foreign manpower for certain jobs. Some developers have halted projects after sending home hundreds of foreign workers whose visas were not renewed and having failed to secure visas for new workers.

According to the U.S. Navy’s environmental impact statement, the operative number of required workers at the peak of the military buildup is 5,000 people. Historically, Guam was exempted from the 66,000 H2 visas a year quota nationwide in consideration of the military buildup vis-a-vis the island’s scarce labor pool. Since December 2015, the trend in denying visa petitions and renewals became noticeable. There has been a zero visa-approval rate since 2016.

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