

Senate passes extension of CNMI CW-1 foreign worker visa program

Pacific Daily News Published 12:34 p.m. ChT June 29, 2018 | Updated 2:07 p.m. ChT June 29, 2018



(Photo: PDN file photo)

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands could have 10 more years to end its dependence on large numbers of foreign workers after the U.S. Senate joined the House of Representatives in approving legislation to extend the current transitional worker program.

The Senate early Friday passed the Northern Mariana Islands U.S. Workforce Act, which was approved by the House earlier this month, according to CNMI Del. Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan.

It would give the CNMI another extension on a [federal deadline \(/story/money/2018/03/21/cnmi-faces-deep-foreign-labor-cuts-later-year/444135002/\)](/story/money/2018/03/21/cnmi-faces-deep-foreign-labor-cuts-later-year/444135002/) to wean its economy from foreign labor.

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"It has been a [long and uncertain legislative road \(/story/money/2018/04/04/labor-abuses-muddy-future-cw-1-work-visa-program-saipan/484293002/\)](/story/money/2018/04/04/labor-abuses-muddy-future-cw-1-work-visa-program-saipan/484293002/) to bring us to this moment," Sablan said. "Now, there is just one last step to take, obtaining the president's signature. I have briefed the White House to expect the legislation. Given its critical importance to the Marianas economy and the bipartisan support for the measure, I do not anticipate the president will object."

The CNMI had local authority on the entry of foreigners for decades, until Congress decided in 2008 to remove local authorities' powers over immigration.

When the CNMI had local power over immigration, it became a magnet for garment factories that made clothes for well-known U.S. clothing brands, but the workers, mostly imported from China, were paid much less than the U.S. minimum wage, and some worked in what some members of Congress had called "sweatshop" conditions.

Congress decided to end the ability of the CNMI to employ large numbers of foreign workers by phasing them out over five years. When the [CNMI-only transitional worker visa CW-1 program began \(https://www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/temporary-workers/cw-1-cnmi-only-transitional-worker\)](https://www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/temporary-workers/cw-1-cnmi-only-transitional-worker) in 2009, 22,417 foreign workers were in the Northern Marianas.

The Department of Labor in 2014 gave the CNMI a five-year extension on the program, until 2019. CNMI officials have said abruptly sending thousands of workers back to their home countries would cripple the local economy.

According to the legislation, there would be a cap of 13,000 foreign workers for fiscal 2019, declining by 500 workers a year, until there are only 11,000 workers in 2023.

The cap would then drop by 1,000 workers a year, from fiscal 2023 until the first quarter of fiscal 2030, when only 1,000 foreign workers will remain in the CNMI under the program, the legislation states.

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