

With only 82 H-2B workers left, Calvo educates feds

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Published 2:47 p.m. ChT Sept. 20, 2017 | Updated 8:27 a.m. ChT Sept. 21, 2017



(Photo: Haidee V Eugenio/PDN)

Gov. Eddie Calvo said the military buildup, as well as the island's health and safety, is at stake if the federal government doesn't resolve the foreign worker visa problem by the end of this year.

Calvo just came back from Washington, D.C. While he was not able to get an immediate response to reverse the near 100 percent rejections of foreign worker visas for Guam, he said the federal government is now more aware about the national implications if the island cannot import any more foreign workers to build military projects.

"Some of the problems that we're feeling has nothing to do with what Kim Jong Un has done, but what ... the federal government in particular, and Homeland Security has done," the governor said at a Guam Contractors Association meeting Wednesday at Hyatt Regency.

Calvo met with Homeland Security Acting Secretary Elaine Duke and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Acting Director James McCament, along with senators on committees relevant to the military buildup.

Federal immigration officials for more than a year have rejected nearly all requests for the use of temporary skilled foreign labor on Guam, through the federal H-2B visa program. Guam businesses sued to force the issuance of visas, but federal officials have argued Guam has abused the program for years.

Only 82 H-2B workers currently remain on island as of Wednesday, said Greg Massey, administrator for the Guam Department of Labor's Alien Labor Processing.

Massey, who went to Washington, D.C., with the governor, said the Guam team suggested a change in regulations that would help solve the issue.

"They listened to what we have to say. Of course, they can't say yes right there. They said they would consider it and they looked like they were really considering it. I think there's a genuine desire for them to fix this because it is affecting the buildup," Massey said.

"It's got to be resolved by the end of the year because if it isn't, then you can anticipate not only delays in terms of startup construction but also increased costs," Calvo later said.

"And again, there's already a price tag to this. So this could jeopardize the whole Marine movement to Guam as a result of this H-2B crisis and I don't believe that our leaders in Washington will allow that to happen."

The military has acknowledged that a large pool of foreign workers will be needed to complete the buildup projects here.

Calvo said he remains steadfast on his resolve to not support the military buildup unless the issue is settled.

In April, Calvo said his administration no longer supports the buildup, citing the federal government's denial of worker visas.

The governor announced that Guam Memorial Hospital's labor delivery unit construction project didn't get any bidders and he believes it's also because of a lack of workers to build the project.

Emphasized Guam's need in D.C. trip

At the GCA meeting, Calvo briefed members on his recent trip to Washington, D.C. He criticized the federal government for causing problems on Guam, but said he educated federal officials about the issue and made some headway.

"We reiterated that Guam has about 6,000 people in the construction workforce. That's approximately 9-percent of Guam's total workforce," Calvo said.

\$5B in five years

Meeting construction needs for civilian and military projects is a challenge, as is attracting American workers from the mainland, Calvo said. "You all know that."

Calvo said that, after the hurricanes in Texas and Florida, the mainland U.S. is in need of construction workers for rebuilding, and it will be even harder for Guam to get American workers. He said the original plan was to also meet with President Trump but Trump had to go to Florida.

(Story continues below video.)

"With rebuilding in Texas, with the rebuilding in Florida, it would be very very difficult to get any, if it was difficult in the past, it'll be even much more difficult to get workers from the continental United States with the ongoing rebuilding," Calvo said.

In the next five years, Guam is expected to see \$5 billion worth of military construction and local infrastructure projects — and that estimate doesn't include private construction projects, Calvo said.

Calvo said once the H-2B issue is resolved, "it would be a wonder to be in the construction industry in Guam between 2017 and 2030."

Addressing Guam's contractors, Calvo said corporate partners could do so much more by also pressing their American corporate headquarters' congressmen, senators, governors and mayors to support Guam's cause including a pending bill for Guam's access to foreign workers.

Federal lawsuit pending

GCA, along with 11 businesses which employed laborers under the H-2B visa program, sued the federal government last year.

Nearly all of the plaintiffs have their H-2B workers since suing last October. A foreign workforce that in recent years exceeded 1,000 employees has dwindled to fewer than 100 in recent months.

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(<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/08/25/businesses-blanket-h-2-b-denials-not-based-evidence/596468001/>)

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(<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/08/23/guam-businesses-struggle-h-2-b-foreign-workers-dwindle/585045001/>)

The businesses have argued the federal government improperly changed the rules. Federal officials have stated the rules are being applied properly, and Guam businesses, for years, have abused the program intended for temporary labor.

Starting in August, millions of dollars' worth of contracts have been awarded by the U.S. military for construction work related to the buildup on Guam. But businesses said they could not even participate in these projects because they do not have enough manpower to do the job after losing their skilled H-2B workers.

Career in Construction Month

Calvo also presented a proclamation, declaring October as Career in Construction Month.

Six apprentices who completed the Registered Apprenticeship Program received U.S. Department of Labor's journeyman's certificates.

The GCA Trades Academy also issued National Center for Construction Education and Research, or NCCER, credentials for those completing various

levels and trade courses.

READ MORE:

[Our View: Foreign worker shortage and H-2B visa rejections causing real problems for Guam](http://www.guampdn.com/story/opinion/2017/08/24/our-view-foreign-worker-shortage-and-h-2-b-visa-rejections-causing-real-problems-guam/596441001/)

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[U.S. Senate proposes labor relief for Guam buildup](http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/09/08/u-s-senate-proposes-labor-relief-guam-buildup/644655001/)

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