

## **Quota for high-tech foreign workers nearly filled**

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### **Body**

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Employers are closing in on the limit for hiring **foreign high-tech workers** for jobs next year, roughly two months before the start of the 2006 fiscal year, an immigration official said Monday.

The number of applications for the jobs, many of them in **high-tech** companies, was **nearly** 52,000 as of Thursday, with 22,383 applications for H-1B visas approved and 29,556 pending.

"The cap will definitely be hit before Oct. 1, which was when it was hit last year," said Chris Bentley, spokesman for the agency that is part of the Department of Homeland Security.

H-1B visas are granted to foreigners in specialty professions such as computer programming. Under the program, employers must pay **foreign workers** the prevailing wage for their job fields and show that qualified U.S. **workers** are not being passed over.

Federal law provides 65,000 H-1B visas every fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1. Of those, 6,800 are set aside for **workers** from Chile and Singapore.

Bentley said he could not predict when the cap would be hit because a flood of applications could come in on a single day or be submitted over several days.

Employers, particularly **high-tech** companies, have long argued that not enough H-1B visas are available.

Congress temporarily raised the number to 195,000 during the **high-tech** boom. In April, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, in a rare visit to Washington, lobbied the Bush administration to lift the limit on H-1B visas, saying anyone with good computer science training is not unemployed. Unions and other critics say the program allows businesses to **fill** jobs with cheaper **foreign** labor.

Meanwhile, employers have used about half of the H-1B visas available this year for **foreign workers** with advanced degrees in math and science. Congress provided an additional 20,000 for foreigners with master's degrees or doctorates in those fields, although the visas didn't become available until May. About 8,200 applications for those visas for the 2006 fiscal year have been approved or are pending.

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