

H-1B VISAS APPROACHING BRIM OF CAP

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Demand for coveted work visas reserved for high-skilled immigrants has been so strong that the annual ceiling on them is about to be reached only five months into the fiscal year, immigration officials said Wednesday.

As of Feb. 15, about 67,000 of the H-1B petitions were approved by the Immigration and Naturalization Service for the fiscal year, agency officials said.

There are about 44,000 more petitions pending with the INS, meaning up to 111,000 may already be accounted for. The cap for the number of H-1B visas that can be distributed between Oct. 1, 1999, and Sept. 30, 2000, is 115,000.

The strong demand for the visas is a reflection of the booming high-tech industry in the United States in recent years. Of about 134,400 H-1B visas distributed between May 11, 1998, and July 31, 1999, about 53 percent of them were given to immigrants filling system analyst or programmer jobs, according to an INS estimate. And 47.5 percent of those were distributed to people from India.

The H-1B visa is valid for three years and is renewable only once for another three-year period. The cap was first reached three years ago, when the ceiling was 65,000. Since then, legislation has increased the cap temporarily to 115,000 last year and this year and to 107,500 next year, before returning to 65,000.

But there has been a slew of new legislation proposed by Republican congressmen to increase the cap or to get rid of it altogether.

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