

# **High-Tech Firms Oppose Major Immigration Cuts; Entry for Skilled Technicians Is Defended**

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## **Body**

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As the congressional debate over immigration heats up, powerful elements of the American business community are entering the fray to oppose major proposed cuts in legal immigration that many companies fear would inhibit their ability to compete in the global economy.

Dozens of executives from leading high-tech firms yesterday descended on Capitol Hill to argue for separating the issues of legal and illegal immigration in proposed legislation that is moving through the House and taking shape in the Senate.

The lobbying effort reflects concerns among U.S. companies that their ability to hire highly skilled foreign talent as legal immigrants will become ensnared in a political backlash against illegal immigration.

"Legal immigration strengthens and energizes America," the National Association of Manufacturers, which counts 13,500 corporate members nationwide, said in a statement. "America's high-tech employees and international personnel should not be considered in the same bill as undocumented entrants and criminal law violators."

The main target of the lobbying effort is a House bill sponsored by Rep. Lamar S. Smith (R-Tex.), chairman of the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration. It would cut legal immigration by 30 percent, reduce refugee admissions by more than 50 percent and crack down on illegal immigrants through a variety of means including border fences and more Border Patrol agents.

The bill also calls for creation of a computer registry to verify that prospective employees are legally eligible to work in the United States.

In the Senate, Sen. Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyo.) is introducing a bill that would slash legal immigration even more sharply as part of legislation that, like the House version, links legal and illegal immigration in the same bill.

In addition, the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform headed by former congresswoman Barbara Jordan (D-Tex.) yesterday released a report that offers detailed recommendations for cuts in legal immigration while supporting "the basic framework" of immigration policy.

Although the proposed cuts in admissions of highly skilled foreigners would affect a relatively small portion of annual immigration, they have caught the attention of such firms as Microsoft, Motorola and Texas Instruments, which were among nearly 60 high-tech firms whose executives voiced their objections on Capitol Hill yesterday.

Up to now, the most outspoken opposition to cuts in legal immigration has come from Hispanic organizations, religious groups and other traditional immigration advocates, which have much less clout than the business community with the Republican-controlled Congress.

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Of the legal immigration limit of nearly 800,000 for fiscal 1995, "skills-based admissions" are set at 140,000. The Smith bill would directly and indirectly remove more than 32,000 of these admissions, while the Simpson bill would cut them to 75,000. The Commission on Immigration Reform recommends a level of 100,000.

"Our ability to get the best talent in the world is critical to us," said Kenneth M. Alvares, a vice president of Sun Microsystems, a fast-growing Silicon Valley computer chip company. Restricting that ability "is going to kill us," he said. "We will not be able to compete."

The firm, which employs 16,000 people, has been unable to fill more than 1,000 highly technical positions and feels it must recruit foreigners. If cuts in skilled admissions are enacted, Alvares said, his company might be forced to do its design work abroad.

"We have thousands of companies that care about this," said Phyllis Eisen, a senior policy director at the National Association of Manufacturers. "If they can't get the people they want, they will move overseas."

Such immigration cutbacks thus could result in a loss of jobs in the United States, said Charles Billingsley, a spokesman for the Information Technology Association of America. "I don't think that's what the legislators have in mind."

Proponents of the Simpson bill argue that reducing the influx of immigrants is what the American public wants. In order to address the need for engineers and scientists, say congressional sources close to the Simpson bill, the legislation would require employers of highly skilled immigrants to pay a fee equal to 30 percent of the employee's first-year salary into a fund to help finance training for Americans.

A potentially far-reaching provision of the House and Senate bills is the provision for a centralized computer verification system, which employers would use to check that a prospective new hire was legally in the country and eligible to work.

Company executives expressed concern that inaccurate or incomplete responses from the new system could result in large numbers of "false denials" of employment to qualified applicants and lead to costly lawsuits. With 65 million new hires a year in the United States, an error rate of only 5 percent would cause the computer to wrongly reject more than 3 million people, and tests of federal data bases have shown error rates closer to 30 percent, critics of the proposal said.

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