



BUSINESS GROUPS UNHAPPY WITH OBAMA ON IMMIGRATION

By Shawn Zeller
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A coalition of business groups that includes the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Home Builders and the trade group that represents Wal-Mart and other large retailers is among the many voices urging President Barack Obama not to go forward with executive action to provide legal status to millions of illegal immigrants now in the country.

The group's position is the latest signal that the mishmash of business groups and immigration advocates who've pushed for comprehensive immigration overhaul in Congress is breaking down.

The Essential Worker Immigration Coalition issued a statement Monday stating that Obama should "avoid circumventing the legislative process." The coalition added that it is "convinced that a legislative approach is the only path to lasting, meaningful reform."

Such an overhaul, embodied in legislation that the Senate passed last year (S 744), gained broad support because it combined something that the business community wants, more legal guest workers, with something that immigration advocates and Hispanics want: the possibility of legal status for the 11 million or so illegal immigrants now in the country.

But the Senate bill didn't win over immigration skeptics among House Republicans and is now dead for the foreseeable future. The coalition statement suggests that there's no consensus on a path forward for those who want to revamp U.S. immigration policies.

"Immigration advocates have started to coalesce around the idea of incremental reforms being more viable," said Geoff Burr, a lobbyist with the Associated Builders and Contractors who co-chairs the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition. "This poisons the well."

Although Obama hasn't released the details of his planned executive action, the business groups don't believe it will include much for them. They want more visas for unskilled workers. The plan, which Obama is planning to unveil on Thursday, is expected to offer work permits to immigrants who have children who are American citizens. The plan is also expected to expand a visa program for high-tech workers.

Groups representing high-tech companies that have lobbied for the Senate immigration bill, including Compete America and FWD.us, have not said how they feel about Obama taking executive action. They represent companies such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook.

Farm interests have also stayed out of the debate over the executive action. Justin Darisse, a spokesman for the Agriculture Workforce Coalition, said it was withholding comment until the plan is unveiled but remained committed to getting immigration legislation expanding agricultural work visas enacted.

Members of the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition had hoped that a new Republican Congress and Obama might find agreement on a more limited immigration bill in 2015, one that would expand guest-worker visas and stiffen border control. But Tamar Jacoby, the president of coalition member ImmigrationWorks USA, which is also a business coalition, said the president's planned executive action has killed that possibility.

"Obama and Congress had an opportunity for a reset after the elections. They didn't take it," she said.

In its statement, the coalition said the possibility that illegal immigrants could win visas under the president's plan puts companies in a dangerous spot.

"Employers are vulnerable when a current employee comes forward and reveals that he or she has been working for the company under a false identity and asks the employer to provide evidence of his or her employment history in order to take advantage of executive relief," the statement said. "An employer faces civil and potentially criminal liability for past hiring of unauthorized workers and may also face discrimination charges for hiring newly documented workers who previously presented fraudulent documents."