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SKILLED SCIENCE WORKERS AT FOCUS OF SECOND SENATE PROPOSAL ON IMMIGRATION

By Julia Preston
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As one bipartisan group of senators released its blueprint on Monday for a comprehensive overhaul of the immigration laws, another group in the Senate was ready to present a proposal addressing one dysfunctional aspect of the system: a shortage of visas for highly skilled immigrants working in science and technology fields.

Four senators, led by Orrin G. Hatch, a Republican from Utah, will introduce a bill on Tuesday that would greatly increase the number of temporary visas available for those immigrants, and would also free up permanent resident visas, known as green cards, so more of those immigrants could settle in the United States and eventually become citizens.

The bill will be the first legislation introduced in Congress on immigration in a year when the once-toxic issue has gathered surprising political momentum. Lawmakers who have shied away from it in recent years are now offering proposals that they are framing as practical solutions to fix a failing system.

Major technology employers like Microsoft, Oracle and others have been calling for years for more visas for foreigners with computer, engineering and mathematics skills, saying they have more jobs than they can fill with Americans who are graduating in those fields from American universities. White House officials and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle acknowledge that a broad overhaul, including a pathway to citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants, would have a better chance at attracting votes for passage, especially among Republicans, if it had vigorous support from business.

A group of eight senators, led by Charles E. Schumer of New York, a Democrat, and John McCain of Arizona, a Republican, on Monday unveiled principles for an overhaul that focused on solving illegal immigration, with increased border security and measures to give legal status to illegal immigrants. Their blueprint referred to changes for highly skilled immigrants, without specifics.

The bill by Mr. Hatch's smaller group, by contrast, is a detailed plan to recalibrate the high-skilled visa system. It would immediately increase the cap on temporary visas for those immigrants, known as an H-1B, to 115,000 a year from the current maximum of 65,000. It would also create, for the first time, a "market-based" system that would rapidly increase the numbers of those visas if the supply ran out, to a maximum of 300,000 H-1B visas in one year.

In the boom before the recession took hold in 2008, there were several years when businesses snatched up all the available H-1B visas in a few days. The market mechanism in Mr. Hatch's bill would lower the cap on temporary visas if demand from employers declined.

Also sponsoring the bill are Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, a Republican who was among the eight senators endorsing the broader blueprint, and Senators Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Chris Coons of Delaware, both Democrats.

In a statement on Monday, Brad Smith, general counsel and executive vice president of Microsoft, said the company “strongly supports efforts to permanently reform our high-skilled immigration system and enact broad immigration reform in 2013.” He enumerated measures the company would like to see in any legislation, including all those in Mr. Hatch’s bill.

Randel K. Johnson, senior vice president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, said his organization had worked closely with the senators on the bill and would send “a letter of strong support.”

Ms. Klobuchar said immigrants had brought new ideas and businesses to the United States. “I truly believe we have to be a country that makes stuff again, that exports to the world,” she said in an interview. “To do that, we have to have innovation.”

“Sadly,” Ms. Klobuchar said, under the current system “we have been training our competition,” because many skilled immigrants were forced to return home after studying and working in the United States.

Mr. Hatch, who fought off a re-election challenge from the right last year, has not said whether he would support comprehensive legislation including legal status for illegal immigrants. Ms. Klobuchar and Mr. Coons said they expected their bill would become part of the broader overhaul.

The bill would allow spouses of temporary immigrants to work, a change that would bring relief to many foreigners – many of them educated women from Asian countries like India – whose careers languished when their spouses came to work in this country. The bill would make it easier for temporary immigrants who are tied to one employer to find a new job if their first job did not work out.

It would also tinker with the system to make more permanent resident green cards available for immigrants in science and technology fields, but without increasing the number of green cards over all, something many Republican lawmakers are loath to do. It would allow the immigration authorities to distribute as many as 300,000 green cards that went unused over the years because of twists in the system.

The bill would make changes to ensure that a much higher percentage of 140,000 employment green cards available each year would go to the skilled immigrants, and not to their family members, as happens now.

Responding to insistent demands from universities, the bill would make an unlimited number of green cards available for foreigners graduating from American universities with advanced science and technology degrees. It would increase visa fees and use the money for training programs for Americans.

Some employee groups said they would oppose the bill, saying the large number of temporary immigrants would undercut wages for Americans. “America is a nation of immigrants, not of guest workers,” said Keith Grzelak, vice president of the IEEE-USA, which represents more than 400,000 engineers.