Senator seeks expanded visas for foreign high-tech workers

(Reuters) - A leading Republican in the U.S. Senate on Tuesday unveiled legislation to raise the number of permanent visas for skilled technical workers from foreign countries, but prospects of passage this year could be clouded by election-year politics.

Senator John Cornyn, the senior Republican on a panel that oversees immigration, introduced a bill that would make an additional 55,000 visas available each year for graduates with master's and doctoral degrees who have studied at U.S. research institutions.

This is one of several immigration-related bills that could be kicked around this year in Congress and in the presidential campaign. But there is scant evidence so far of enough consensus to get anything enacted into law.

Other measures could focus on trying to help children of illegal immigrants who want to attend U.S. colleges or serve in the U.S. military.

Cornyn's proposal to add visas for foreign-born engineers, mathematicians, scientists and other with high-tech skills are important to U.S. technology companies that want to improve access to an international pool of workers and stem the shortage of such talent in this country.

A Cornyn aide said the measure would not add to the overall number of U.S. visas available, because it would eliminate 55,000 "diversity visas" for individuals from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States.

Broad immigration reform is likely to be a hot topic in this year's presidential campaign, especially after Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican challenger to President Barack Obama, staked out a tough anti-immigration stance during the primary campaign earlier this year.

Democrats generally have pushed for comprehensive immigration reforms, rather than focusing just on specific problem areas like highly skilled foreign-born workers.

But in recent years, after comprehensive reform efforts sputtered, they have pushed for helping "dreamers" go to college or serve in the U.S. military. They are the 1 million to 2 million people who slipped into the United States as children of illegal immigrants and face uncertain prospects after graduation from U.S. high schools.

Cornyn's narrowly drawn initiative would add to the approximately 85,000 "H-1B" temporary visa slots for foreigners with high-tech training and would be aimed at

graduates who have job offers in the United States in fields related to their studies.

Cornyn said his bill would "bolster American competitiveness and provide a stronger foundation for long-term economic growth and job creation" in the United States.

Boeing Co Chief Executive Jim McNerney last week told a conference in Washington that the United States was losing critically needed engineers and others to competitor countries because they were being forced out after obtaining advanced degrees at U.S. universities.

"We have to remember how this country was built. All of us are sons and daughters of immigrants that showed up here and made our way. We've cut off that flow," he said, noting the United States now had some 2 million unfilled high-tech jobs.

It was unclear whether other conservative Republicans in the Senate would back Cornyn's initiative. Democrats hold a majority in the Senate and are unlikely to allow Cornyn's legislation to advance in its current form.

A Senate Democratic aide said Democrats prefer to address the high-tech visa question in the larger context of immigration reform "rather than cherry-pick certain workers."

The aide noted that the U.S. agriculture community wants improved access to seasonal farm hands from abroad, and Hispanics have long clamored for reforming an outdated immigration code that has left approximately 11 million illegals living in the United States.

(This May 15 story has been corrected to say permanent visas in first paragraph, from temporary visas)

(Reporting By Richard Cowan [1]; Additional reporting by Andrea Shalal-Esa [2]; Editing by Marilyn W. Thompson, Todd Eastham [3] and Richard Pullin [4]; Desking by Vicki Allen)

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