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White House weighs tougher visa restrictions for foreign workers Trump administration officials met this week to discuss a possible executive order

Aime Williams in Washington and Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson in New York yesterday
Financial Times

The Trump administration is weighing a significant expansion of current visa restrictions for foreign workers, widening the scope to include the highly skilled workers relied on by industries ranging from tech to tourism.

Several of President Donald Trump's cabinet members and top advisers met on Tuesday afternoon to discuss a possible executive order to suspend the issuance of visas to several classes of individuals, said four people briefed on the meeting.

The president's decision was still unclear, and groups within the White House were pushing different recommendations, they cautioned. However, business groups are growing increasingly concerned that the expected restrictions would go beyond renewing a 60-day ban on new "green card" immigrant visas that Mr Trump announced in April, and which expires on Monday.

Lobbyists said they increasingly expect the president to impose a "pause" on the issuance of new H-1B, H-2B, H4 EAB and L1 intracompany transfer visas, either for an initial 60 days, or for more than 120 days.

They said they were not expecting the executive order to affect people already in the US or waiting to fly back into the country on such visas. Companies remain hopeful that the executive order would include some exemptions for healthcare workers and those involved in the food supply chain.

The move is likely to be framed as an attempt to encourage US companies to hire Americans left unemployed by coronavirus, but lawyers and lobbyists have pushed back.

"Most of this doesn't help the economy one bit — the H-1B, H-2B and J sectors are not the ones where unemployment rates are really high right now," said a lawyer familiar with the talks, calling the proposal under discussion "just another way for the anti-immigrant groups to advance their agenda".

Business groups and executives have intensified their lobbying in recent weeks, warning Mr Trump, his son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner and other officials that restricting the influx of skilled workers would damage US companies further at a time when the coronavirus has triggered a historic economic crisis.

"There is a lot of pushback [from business], including directly to the president," said Jeremy Robbins, executive director of New American Economy, a bipartisan think-tank.

Other business representatives in Washington said they expected any executive order to be challenged in court, as many of Mr Trump's other immigration orders have been. On Thursday, the US Supreme Court blocked his administration's attempt to rescind a ban on deporting 700,000 unauthorised immigrants who came to the US as children.

Universities have also lobbied hard against any ban on the Optional Practical Training visas, used by many international students entering the US, warning that it could cut off a lucrative revenue stream on which some institutions have come to depend. It was not immediately clear whether the White House would include student visas in the clampdown.

H-1B visas — commonly associated with the technology and consulting industries but also used by companies in other sectors from retailing to manufacturing — are usually issued on October 1. An extended delay could affect every company looking to bring people in on these visas this year.

“That pause is going to be a jobs programme for Canada,” warned one lobbyist, who said companies would have to locate the people they had planned to bring to the US north of the border. Cities from Toronto to Vancouver had been pitching themselves to US companies as attractive alternatives to navigating an increasingly hostile US immigration system.

Two people briefed on the administration's discussions said they had included a proposal to raise the fee for applications and renewals of certain categories of visa to as much as \$20,000 but that this had been shelved.

Stephen Miller, a hardline White House aide who is close to Mr Trump, Ken Cuccinelli, the acting director of US citizen and immigration services, and Chad Wolf, acting homeland security secretary, were among those pushing for tougher restrictions, several people said.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.