



Bill to Ease Visa Restrictions on Minor League Athletes Approved by Congress, Goes to President's Desk for Signature

December 11, 2006

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) today announced that legislation to ease visa restrictions on athletes from other countries participating in minor league sports leagues, competitions, or performances has been approved by Congress and now goes to the President's desk to be signed into law.

The COMPETE Act passed the Senate on Wednesday, December 7, by unanimous consent. The bill then passed the House of Representatives by voice vote on Friday, December 9, 2006.

“The COMPETE Act allows top-notch athletes from around the world the opportunity to compete and perform in the United States without facing unfair and unnecessary visa restrictions,” Senator Feinstein said.

“There's no reason that minor league athletes should face tougher visa restrictions than their counterparts in the major leagues. Once signed into law, this bill will provide a level playing field for all foreign athletes seeking to compete in the United States.”

Minor league athletes from other countries currently face much stricter visa restrictions than their major league counterparts. Major league athletes are eligible for “P” visas, but minor league athletes currently must enter the country as part of the H-2B seasonal worker visa program.

This has been a problem in recent years because the H-2B cap of 66,000 visas has been met in the first few months of the fiscal year, leaving foreign minor league athletes with little or no opportunity to enter the United States. As a result, minor league baseball, basketball, hockey, and ice skating programs in the United States have been prevented from recruiting hundreds of foreign athletes each year.

The COMPETE Act would reclassify minor league athletes so that they are eligible to enter the country under the “P” visa category. The bill prohibits the issuing of a visa to anyone from a country that is a “state sponsor of international terrorism” unless the Secretary of State determines that person is not a threat.

Sports organizations benefiting from the COMPETE Act include:

- **Major League Baseball**, which was unable to bring 350 baseball players to the United States in the 2004 and 2005 seasons when the H-2B visa caps were filled before they were able to provide visas for minor league players they wanted to recruit.
- **The National Basketball Association**, which has been unable to sign a significant number of qualified international players to its Development League during each of the past two seasons because of the cap on H-2B visas.
- **Disney on Ice**, which is often short on ice skaters for their productions because the H-2B visa cap has been reached before the commencement of their training period in August and subsequent touring season beginning in September.

The legislation was sponsored in the Senate by Senators Susan Collins (R-Maine), Feinstein, and John Cornyn (R-Texas), and in the House by Representative Tom Feeney (R-Fla.).

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