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## New Law Should Eliminate Visa Issues

By J.J. Cooper and Chris Kline

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A bill headed to President Bush's desk is expected to make life easier for foreign minor leaguers and will allow major league organizations to bring more players into the United States.

The bill, which is expected to be signed into law before the end of the year, will shift minor league baseball players from the H-2B visa to the P-1 classification, which is set aside for internationally recognized athletes and entertainers. In the past, minor leaguers were not considered "internationally recognized," which forced them to get H-2B season workers visas. That became a problem in 2005 as demand for seasonal farm and resort workers began to outstrip the limit of 65,000 visas set aside for that category.

The high demand for visas left a number of players unable to get into the United States and forced them to either sit out the season or play in the Dominican Summer League. The problem was reduced in 2006, but teams still had to be careful as to how they allocated their limited number of visas.

If minor league players qualify for P-1 visas, teams will be able to bring more foreign players to the United States. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) wrote the bill with help from Major League Baseball's operations staff.

"We've been working on this with the Players Association and Minor League Baseball for several years," Major League Baseball spokesman Pat Courtney said. "We're very pleased with the result."

Deciding how to distribute a team's visas has been a constant part of a farm director's job. But now that problem may be eliminated.

"This bill was just passed. We're waiting to see how it will be interpreted by the day-to-day staff," Courtney said. "But our understanding is that (a limit on the number of visas) won't be an issue."

It also may help Canadian players in the draft.

"From the perspective up here, anything that opens up the number of visas will benefit Canadian players," Baseball Canada national team coach Greg Hamilton said. "If you're drafting in a later round, do you want to deal with restrictive visa issues? Anytime that window of opportunity opens up it benefits Canadian baseball players."

Several farm directors declined comment on the issue, saying they wanted to be briefed by Major League Baseball about the changes.

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