



The Immigration Brief

By HLG | May 2026

EB2 NIW Update: Current Visa Bulletin, Longer USCIS Timelines, and What This Means for Pilots, AMEs and STEM Professionals

Dear valued clients and partners,

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We are pleased to share this latest Newsletter with you, to keep you apprised of our observations into the performance of the EB2 NIW Program in the first quarter of 2026. As always, you will find our regular press review following this update. While the focus of our clients largely remains on Pilots, we also wish to remind readers that this route remains available to qualified AMEs and STEM professionals as well.

USCIS Processing Times Continue to Slow

Our recent experience over the past few months confirms that USCIS processing for EB2 NIW petitions has continued to slow down. In many cases, the standard processing time for an Immigrant Petition for Alien Workers (I-140) is now approximately 24 months before a decision is issued. This is consistent with the broader trend of extended adjudication timelines seen across the category. In fact, the official processing time for I-140 is currently indicated as 25.5 months.

Fortunately, Premium Processing remains an option that is available and can be triggered at any time of the process. Hence, if your application is currently under process, you may inform us if you would like to activate Premium Processing. Under this option, USCIS must reply to each correspondence within 45 business days, which could mean issuing approval, request for evidence, notice of intent to deny, or denial.

Further Practical Indicators of Operational Strains

The longer processing timeline noted above is a consequence of the operational strains USCIS is under, as identified in our previous Newsletter of August 2025. At the time the processing timeline was about 18 months. The extension to 25.5 months demonstrates that USCIS is still struggling to efficiently process applications and it is difficult to say whether this duration will be reduced or further extended in the coming months.

Recently, some further indicators show that the USCIS is having some difficulties in keeping up – for instance we have been receiving some incomplete RFEs with missing pages, and some RFEs are sometimes reaching us weeks after they have supposedly been issued or not at all. We are mindful of these and will address the issues when they arise (whether it is by contacting USCIS, working under short deadlines, or even issue motions to reopen cases).

Positive Movement on Visa Availability

There is, however, good news on the visa bulletin front. The EB-2 category is now current for most countries, which means that many applicants can move forward without waiting for a priority-date backlog. At present, the main exceptions remain China and India, where significant backlogs continue to apply.

For applicants from chargeability areas outside those backlogged countries, this is an encouraging development and may help shorten the overall path once the I-140 petition is approved. We recall that our previous Newsletter of August 2025 was issued when the Final Action Date for EB2 category was October 15, 2023 at minimum (even for those outside China and India). The current situation is therefore a very significant leap forward – and in some way can help compensate the now longer processing timeline of I-140 adjudications.

Case Strategy and Outcome

We must unfortunately maintain the position stated in our previous newsletters. USCIS continues to apply a cautious and highly case-specific approach when reviewing EB2 NIW petitions, and there is no consistency across. In our experience, outcomes remain difficult to predict, and strong preparation is more important than ever.

For this reason, we continue to recommend that each petition be prepared carefully, with strong supporting documentation tailored to the applicant's profile and proposed

endeavor. The current environment requires patience, realism, and a well-structured filing strategy.

AMEs and STEM Professionals

As a reminder, the EB2 NIW Program is not limited to pilots. Aircraft Maintenance Engineers and STEM professionals may also qualify where their background, experience, and proposed work can demonstrate national interest. We continue to see this route as a valuable option for professionals whose skills support safety, innovation, and the U.S. national interest.

As always, we remain committed to supporting you and your family throughout your immigration journey with thoughtful guidance and careful compliance.



— Jean-François Harvey
HLG Global Managing Partner

Learn more about Jean-François Harvey and our team [here](#).

HLG Pilot Articles



Why the U.S. Is Worried About Pilot Shortages and What It Means for Airlines (Simple Flying)

- U.S. airlines face an acute shortage of experienced captains, not just entrylevel pilots, intensifying recruitment pressure.
- Mandatory retirement at age 65 is accelerating attrition at major U.S. carriers.
- Airlines increasingly look beyond traditional domestic pipelines as training timelines lag demand.



Supply Chain Chaos Becomes Aviation's "New Norm" as Demand Hits Records (Reuters)

- Commercial aviation demand is more than 9% above prepandemic levels.
- Workforce shortages, including flight crew, are now a binding constraint on airline growth.
- Airlines warn that staffing limitations—not aircraft—are increasingly grounding capacity.



Airline Pilot Hiring Shows Renewed Momentum (AOPA News)

- Airline pilot hiring is accelerating again in 2026 after a slowdown in early 2025, driven by rising travel demand and longterm staffing needs.
- Major U.S. carriers—including American, United, Delta, and JetBlue—are planning large hiring waves, with United alone projecting nearrecord recruitment of about 2,500 pilots.
- Mandatory retirements and a shrinking pipeline of new pilots are creating a projected shortage exceeding 28,000 pilots by 2030, keeping hiring momentum strong.



U.S. airlines must certify merit-based pilot hiring, FAA says (Reuters)

- The FAA will now require U.S. airlines to formally certify that their pilot hiring practices are meritbased, following political scrutiny over diversity initiatives.
- Airlines must attest that hiring decisions prioritize qualifications, skills, and safety standards, not demographic targets or nonmerit criteria.
- The policy shift comes amid ongoing debate in Washington about workforce diversity programs and their role in aviation safety and recruitment.



Spirit Airlines recalls furloughed pilots as it prepares to emerge from bankruptcy (Reuters)

- Spirit Airlines is recalling furloughed pilots as it prepares to exit Chapter 11 bankruptcy.
- The airline says restoring pilot staffing is essential to rebuilding its schedule and stabilizing operations.
- Spirit expects to emerge from bankruptcy later this year after restructuring debt and reducing costs.



Aircraft technicians make six figures and airlines can't find enough of them (Wall Street Journal)

- Airlines are struggling to hire enough aircraft technicians even as many now earn sixfigure pay.
- A wave of retirements, expanding fleets, and heavy maintenance demand are widening the labor gap.
- Carriers are boosting wages, training programs, and recruitment efforts, but shortages are expected to persist.



Pilot Shortage in 2026: Supply, Demand and the Real U.S. Pilot Market (Skyfarer Academy)

- The article says pilot hiring demand in 2026 remains strong despite talk of the shortage easing.
- Airlines continue expanding training pipelines and recruiting aggressively because retirements and fleet growth still outpace pilot supply.
- The shortage is less severe than the peak years but remains a longterm structural challenge for the industry.



24,000 Pilots Short: Aviation's Staffing Crisis Peaks in 2026 (MigFlug)

- Global aviation is projected to face a shortage of about 24,000 pilots in 2026 as demand outpaces training capacity.
- Airlines are raising pay, expanding cadet programs, and accelerating recruitment to keep fleets operating.
- Retirements, pandemic-era training disruptions, and rapid growth in commercial and cargo flying drive the shortage.



Pilot Shortage Ongoing in the U.S. and Around the World (Epic Flight Academy)

- Epic Flight Academy says the pilot shortage remains severe, with demand for new pilots far exceeding global training capacity.
- Retirements, high training costs, and postpandemic gaps continue to limit the supply of qualified pilots.
- Forecasts show tens of thousands of additional pilots will be needed through 2027 and beyond, keeping long-term demand strong.



Navigating the Pilot Shortage: Key Statistics for 2026 (AirAdvisor)

- The global pilot shortage is expected to peak at around 24,000 pilots in 2026, driven by retirements, disrupted training pipelines, and rising travel demand.
- Even by 2032, the U.S. market alone is projected to remain short more than 17,000 qualified pilots despite expanded training capacity.
- Rapid wage growth, grounded regional aircraft, and aggressive airline hiring reflect a structural shortage that will take most of the decade to resolve.

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