

Statement of Representative Joe Wilson
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and
International Law
April 16, 2008

Oversight Hearing on: the H-2B Program

I would like to begin by thanking the committee for holding this hearing. I think it is fair to say that this is a topic that has a number of different consequences – all of which should be addressed at the Federal and State level.

Congress has been debating immigration reform for quite some time now, and the debate has been contentious. There are individuals of good faith on every side of this issue. So, it is not with precipitous haste that we should make any final decision regarding the overall reform of our immigration policy in this country.

There are areas, however, that should be addressed in the immediate future. In particular, I am referring to the topic of today's hearing: the H-2B visa program. This is a program that has been very successful in boosting the tourism, restaurant, and hotel industries in the state of South Carolina and in communities all around the country. It is a lawful and orderly way to provide a temporary workforce. So, with many communities relying heavily on these types of industries, we should reauthorize the returning-worker provision of the H-2B visa program, a legislative fix previously passed by Congress, even while we debate larger reforms to our nation's immigration policy.

Despite what some have said, an extension of the returning-worker provision is not an unchecked expansion of our immigration policy nor is it a reckless opening of the flood gates for greater and greater numbers of immigrants. It is not a new program. This is an extension of an existing program which expired a few months ago. It is not an amnesty program. It is, in fact, exactly the type of immigration reform we should be focusing on: a lawful and fair framework for those seeking to work temporarily within the United States on a mutually beneficial basis within our communities. The users of these visas work seasonal jobs, complementing a full-time workforce, and must return to their home countries every year. These users and their employers must follow careful procedures ensuring they do not take jobs away from Americans and must follow strict immigration laws that are currently in place.

It has become clear that the temporary extensions authorized in years past will force us to have this same debate each year. Meanwhile, a program such as this that has a proven record of positive, legal support to our economy will be constantly in jeopardy. Small businesses that benefit immensely from the H-2B program will be unable to rely on or plan for their seasonal employment. That is why I and several of my colleagues have called for a permanent extension of the returning-worker provision. American small businesses, the foundation of our nation's economy, benefit most when they can plan for their future. When they are successful, our nation's economy grows stronger.

I have actively worked with my colleagues in Congress to bring a clean extension of the H-2B returning-worker provision to a vote. I am troubled that this extension has been held up. The tourism, restaurant, and hotel industries in South Carolina – particularly in the Lowcountry – benefit immensely from a temporary and legal workforce that these visas provide. To let the extension provision stay expired without action ignores the needs of our nation’s business community, its employees, and damages our economy.