

## Tourism thrives

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**Business Reporter**

State tourism leaders expect the industry's economic impact to reach an all-time high of \$9 billion this year, but said last week that continued success hinges on resolving critical workforce issues.

A major concern, they said, is potential tightening of the number of temporary work visas for foreign workers.

Many temporary workers fill critical seasonal jobs thanks to the H-2B visa program, which since 1990 has capped the visas at 66,000 annually, according to the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

A measure designed to allow that number to grow, 2005's Save Our Small and Seasonal Business Act, is set to expire a week from today. It expanded the visa program by exempting workers who had participated previously from counting toward the cap.

Current House and Senate versions of legislation to extend the 2005 waivers have many co-sponsors, including U.S. Rep. Jo Bonner, R-Mobile, according to the association. But the Washington, D.C.-based trade association remains concerned neither bill will get to a vote before next week's deadline.

Lee Sentell, director of the state tourism bureau, said he's urging colleagues to explain to lawmakers that being able to hire enough workers "is a survival issue, not only for individual businesses, but for our whole economy."

Attendees at the state tourism conference last week in Orange Beach called labor the No. 1 issue locally and nationally.

Pedro Mandoki, president of Mandoki Hospitality Inc. in Gulf Shores, said that if his business is to continue to thrive, the workers must continue to come. During peak season, he said, there can be as many as 3,000 such workers on the Alabama coast.

Retirement Systems of Alabama-affiliated hotels and resorts often use student workers imported through a visa program different than the H-2B, sometimes developing living quarters for such student workers.

They feed a tourism juggernaut. State officials estimated late week that as much as a quarter of the state's tourism revenue is generated along the Alabama Gulf Coast.

According to the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau, Gulf hotels were more than 91 percent booked through the summer months in 2007, with guests paying an average rate of nearly \$164 per night. In summer 2004, when beach popularity was at its pre-Hurricane Ivan height, occupancy was 83 percent at an average daily rate of \$147.

Those rooms need people to make beds, vacuum floors, and clean bathrooms, Mandoki said. But with unemployment in Baldwin County generally less than 3 percent and a lot of better-paying jobs in the marketplace, such workers are hard to find.

H-2B visa

Marlene Colucci, executive vice president of public policy for the hotel and lodging association, was in Orange Beach last week. She said that the H-2B visa is one of three major issues the industry group is focused on.

There are also fears that Department of Homeland Security regulations requiring more rigorous checks of immigrants' Social Security documentation could prove cumbersome for the hospitality industry and delay the arrival of new workers.

And the association has targeted a proposal that would make it easier for the industry's workers to join labor unions.

Colucci said current law dictates a federally supervised election if 30 percent of employees in any given company fill out cards, provided by union representatives, indicating that they want union representation. A proposal defeated in the Senate this year would have provided for instant unionization if more than half of a workplace's employees say they want a union on such cards.

Colucci said without private elections, workers would be more likely to be intimidated into voting "yes," and that resulting unions would drive up payroll cost and hinder efficiency since workers' roles and hours would be strictly defined.

Amanda Cooper, spokeswoman for New York-based union UNITE HERE, said the idea that workers would feel pressured into voting yes should a new law pass is "laughable."

Statistics "really show is that it's the managers who perform the coercion" against unionization, said Cooper, whose organization counts hotel and restaurant workers among its 450,000 active members.

Industry advocates are convinced some form of the union bill will return in 2008.

As they closed last week's tourism conference, local industry officials also pondered a possible threat from a neighbor -- the Mississippi coast as it redevelops post Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricanes 'urban renewal for coastlines'

"There's one challenge we don't have a lot of control over," said Sentell. "Hurricanes are a form of urban renewal for coastlines, and this hurricane has given the Mississippi Gulf Coast a chance to reinvent itself with hugely expensive casinos. It will be a destination that will rival any gambling destination in America."

Mandoki added that "great acts, great restaurants, great facilities" on a new casino row could attract even non-gamblers.

Yet Sentell said Alabama's beaches will occupy a different niche.

"We attract upscale families," he said. "They want to bring their families and have a week of togetherness. ... The Alabama Gulf Coast will continue to do that whereas if you go across the state line, it's going to be faster-paced entertainment."