

Caps on foreign workers worry Sierra ski resorts

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RENO, Nev. — Federal regulations limiting the number of foreign workers allowed into the United States could leave Sierra ski resorts scrambling for labor this season.

Ski schools in particular could be hit hard if Congress doesn't amend the rules, resort operators told the Reno Gazette-Journal in Saturday editions.

"It's kind of a nightmare for us," said Ed Youmans, general manager of Diamond Peak ski resort in Incline Village. "It's very serious."

For years, ski resorts have depended to a large degree on seasonal workers from places like Australia, New Zealand and South America. The bulk of those workers — lift attendants, parking aides, restaurant workers and the like — are brought in by student visas.

Those workers are unaffected by the current problem, which instead involves visas used by skilled workers who typically work at resorts for a longer period than the students.

A cap of 33,000 so-called H-2B visas was reached Oct. 1, and ski resorts learned this week that the government will reject all additional applications unless Congress acts to remove the quota. Legislation to do so has yet to be acted upon.

Roughly 200 of the 1,500 to 2,000 foreign workers California resorts planned to bring in this season could be prevented from doing so, said Bob Roberts, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association.

The positions are typically veteran ski instructors, snowmaking experts and ski patrol specialists, Roberts said. Others are involved in food and beverage work.

Should Congress fail to change the situation, the resort will do its best to fill the positions with other people, but otherwise some reduction in services to the customer is possible, Youmans said.

"Ski school is by far the biggest concern," said Chip Seamans, general manager and chief operations officer at Kirkwood Mountain. Thirty-one Kirkwood employees could be affected, including 16 returning to the resort after working previous seasons, Seamans said.

"They are experienced instructors that are very valuable to us and difficult to find in the States," Seamans said. "This has definitely got our attention."

The ski industry association plans to begin actively lobbying Congress to correct the problem on Monday, Roberts said. Last year, U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., fixed a similar situation. She was concerned about potential effects on her state's soft-shell crab industry, Roberts said.