

## Congress delays action on foreign worker bill

### Local ski resorts hired fewer visa workers

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Congress has postponed action on H-2B visas before its Christmas recess, but the delay shouldn't burden Tahoe-Truckee ski resorts over the holidays.

Pending federal legislation, several local ski areas were denied visas that would have brought back seasoned international workers — employees valued for their experience.

While Squaw Valley and Northstar said earlier this year they received their H-2B visas before the quota was filled, officials from Alpine Meadows and Sugar Bowl said they were counting on the federal legislation to grant access for a significant number of their seasonal staff.

To make up for the lost visas, both resorts said they have been actively hiring new employees, including international workers through the J-1 visa program, which is typically used by foreign students studying in America.

Both resorts said they hired enough staff to carry them through the holidays.

“We've been aggressively recruiting throughout California to fill our employment needs,” said Sugar Bowl spokesman Greg Murtha. “The fresh snow has renewed interest in working at the ski resorts.”

Despite covering their employment needs for the short term, the ski resorts are still keeping a close eye on Congressional moves in Washington.

“We had a really good long-standing relationship with those specific people” using H-2B visas, said Rachael Woods, Alpine Meadows' spokesperson. “They were really valued employees and they were part of the family.”

If Congress approves the legislation later this winter, Murtha said Sugar Bowl would then evaluate their employment needs to determine whether the resort should pursue hiring employees under the H-2B program.

“We're never completely hired,” he said. “It's an ongoing process. We're continuously looking for good people.”

Alpine Meadows is still hoping their H-2B visa employees can return for this season.

“We are waiting for an answer on that particular subject in legislation,” Woods said. “And we're hoping that

Sugar Bowl ski resort employee Gabriel Tenorio is from Brazil and working in the United States on a J1 visa. Recent changes to federal visa guidelines have made it more difficult for resorts to hire foreign workers.  
Seth Lightcap/Sierra Sun



passes.”

The visas are generally available to international workers at ski areas. But the quota of 33,000 visas was filled before some resorts submitted their applications. No exception was made for workers returning under the visa program.

In the meantime, a bill made its way to Congress to extend the exception for returning H-2B visa workers. The bill would allow those who have previously worked on H-2B visas to return to the United States without counting against the current visa cap.

Congress has yet to approve the bill.

“I’m afraid the H-2B situation doesn’t have enough gravitas for Congress to consider it before they go on recess for the holidays,” said Executive Director Bob Roberts of the California Ski Industry Association.

Roberts said he thought Congress may pass the exception bill sometime in January.

“Anyone who knows politics doesn’t expect anything to happen fast in Washington,” he said. “This is a waiting game, but we’re talking to the right people like (Speaker of the House) Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and hoping to get this done right after the break.”

For updates on the H-2B visas, visit [www.savesmallbusiness.org](http://www.savesmallbusiness.org).

— *Kyle Magin, Sun News Service, contributed to this report.*