



Ski resorts struggle with cap on foreign-worker visas

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A federal foreign-worker visa program used by local ski resorts filled its quota in July, leaving many resorts looking elsewhere for help.

Last year, many Tahoe resorts were sent scrambling after a logjam in requests for government H-2B visas created a shortage in skilled workers.

The resorts will see the impact this year, some more than others, but they remain confident they'll be staffed by the time the snow flies.

The H-2B program provides visas for skilled, seasonal foreign workers. Last year, resorts lobbied Congress to expand the quota to include an exemption for H-2B workers from the 2006-'07 season. That request was denied.

Heavenly and Kirkwood would not disclose the number of workers it will lose because of the visa restrictions. Sierra-at-Tahoe, which retained 65 of its H-2B visa workers, has applied for about 50 more, but officials there are not confident they will get them.

"We fully expect to be denied, just like everyone else," said Kirsten Cattell, Sierra-at-Tahoe spokeswoman.

Bob Roberts, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association, said H-2B workers generally are highly skilled either in maintenance/repair work or as instructors.

Kirkwood and Heavenly officials expressed disappointment that many of their loyal employees won't be returning.

It's unfortunate that the H-2B visa continues to be a topic of hot discussion without significant results, because of the many issues involved in immigration and it being an election year, said Allison R. Grant, director of human resources at Kirkwood.

"We are, of course, disappointed with this year's lack of results; however, the team here at Kirkwood is resourceful and flexible — and we're just looking forward to an exciting winter season," she said.

"We're disappointed that some of our talented co-workers won't be able to join us this season," said Russ Pecararo, spokesman for Heavenly. "We will continue to work diligently to resolve this situation and bring them back next season."

Roberts said most regional resorts couldn't get any H-2B visas. "These are great people who come here, work hard and go home when the season is over," he said. "A lot of resorts lost a lot of instructors with this program."

Jessica VanPernis, the communications manager for Northstar-at-Tahoe resort, said their ownership group (which includes Sierra-at-Tahoe) was able to submit applications for H-2B workers early.

"Basically, our human resources department was aware of the cap and submitted our H-2B applications very early," VanPernis said. "Each year, Northstar averages about 60 to 80 H-2Bs."

Roberts said he expects the H-2B crisis to possibly be fixed next year, but said the outlook is grim for the 2008-09 season.

"This is something we're not going to be able to get this year," Roberts said. "There is a large Latino caucus in Congress that is looking for some immigration reform and an easier route for people into the U.S. Until that gets solved, no other immigration matters will be taken care of."

Roberts said the ski industry does have lobbyists in Washington, D.C., who are attempting to secure exemptions for former H-2B employees and expand number of H-2B workers allowed in the future.

Until then, Roberts said, many resorts will be out of luck.

“Each year, the ski industry brings in more than 2,000 H-2B workers, and this year we only got about 10 percent of that,” Roberts said. “This is definitely something that will hurt services at resorts this year.”