

H-2B visa snafu to cut into Aspen Skiing Co. ranks Company expects to receive about 200 fewer temporary employment permits

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ASPEN — The Aspen Skiing Co. expects its number of foreign workers using temporary employment permits to be cut in half next winter.

The Skico has used the H-2B visa program for several years to help ease the chronic worker shortage in the Roaring Fork Valley. About 400 Skico workers came to the country on the temporary employment permits last winter, according to Jim Laing, Skico vice president of human resources. He expects that number to fall to about 200 this winter.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service announced July 31 that it had reached the cap on H-2B visas for the first half of fiscal year 2009. It stopped accepting applications.

“It wasn’t a surprise, but it was a disappointment,” Laing said.

The temporary employment permits are used by U.S. companies to ease seasonal labor shortages. The immigration service issues 66,000 such visas per year. Half are issued in the fall for winter employment.

Laing said an employer cannot apply earlier than 120 days before the workers would be employed. The Skico applied, and had applications accepted, for some employees — mostly ski instructors, who will start early due to training and other duties. The company wasn’t able to apply to fill positions such as lift operators, Laing said.

Use of H-2B visas has gotten tangled in the broader immigration debate. Prior to last year, returning employees were exempt from the 66,000 H-2B visas quota. But Congress has been in a stalemate over the controversial immigration issue, so the exemption for returning employees hasn’t been renewed.

Since the shortage of H-2B visas came as no surprise, Laing and his staff are recruiting employees in other ways. They have already planted seeds promoting winter jobs with workers at Lake Powell and other summer resorts, he said. The company is banking on its offer of housing to help it find enough employees.

The American Hotel and Lodging Association has emerged as a leading lobbyist on Capitol Hill to push Congress into increasing the cap on H-2B visas. Laing said trade associations for the ski industry are also “intensely focused” on lobbying for change.

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