



# Vail Daily

## Lawmakers call for more visas

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EAGLE COUNTY , Colorado — Guest-worker visa troubles that affect Vail and other resort towns need immediate attention, congressional hopefuls said.

The “H-2B” visa program, used by Vail and many other resorts to hire foreign workers, issues 66,000 seasonal worker visas each year. In past years, returning H-2B workers did not count under that cap, but that exemption expired last September.

That means the number of H-2B approved workers decreased drastically, and this year many seasonal industries, including resorts, are feeling the effects.

Vail Resorts announced earlier this week that some of their longtime international ski instructors would not be returning this year due to the visa troubles, and other local businesses have reported being unable to get the workers they needed through the program.

This year the visa quota was hit on July 30, before many employers had time to file their applications for the visas.

Congress has not renewed the exemption, and bills to do so have been blocked so far.

Avon immigration lawyer Chris Pooley said he doubts the problem will be addressed before Congress adjourns in October.

The bills do not have the support they need, representatives hesitate to address thorny issues in an election year, and some leaders want to tackle the larger problem of illegal immigration before fixing the smaller guest worker program, Pooley said.

“It’s unfortunate because H-2B is legal immigration,” he said. “It’s one part of the system that does work.”

### H-2B overhaul

Meanwhile, Colorado Congressional representatives and congressional hopefuls said they plan to work toward a solution for a program that is important to the resort industries in Colorado.

The three Democrat candidates for Colorado’s 2nd Congressional District, Jared Polis, Joan Fitz-Gerald and Will Shafroth weighed in on the problem. The winner of the primary in the predominately Democratic district, which includes Eagle, Summit and Grand counties, is likely to take the place of U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, who is running to replace retiring U.S. Sen. Wayne Allard.

Shafroth said he thinks the H-2B problem needs immediate attention, and that if elected to Congress, he would sign onto the extension bills.

“I think we need to have a more vigorous program to meet the needs of employers in Colorado, important needs that aren’t being met,” Shafroth said.

That would entail not only issuing more visas, but also getting them to employers more quickly, he said.

When speaking with employers, a common complaint is that immigration agencies are slow to issue the visas.

"In a ski area, say you need people to run the ski lifts — you need those people in place in November, or it's not doing you any good," Shafroth said.

Fitz-Gerald agreed changes need to be made as far as how many visas are available, as well as well as the chronological way they are issued — employers apply for the visas in two waves, one for winter season and one for summer season.

Winter-season areas like Vail cannot begin to apply for the visas until July 1, and the system puts those areas at a disadvantage, Fitz-Gerald said.

"The number issued is woefully low, and it's not enough," she said. "It should be someone from this district that advocates that change."

### **Hope with a new Congress?**

Fitz-Gerald said that the current Congress has "pushed the issue off," but she hopes if elected, she can be part of a new Congress that will deal with the problems.

"I hope with a 70-seat turnover, that all these pending problems can get dealt with, no matter how thorny or difficult," she said. "Let's not just warm a seat."

Other leaders are saying that solutions to the H-2B visa shortage should be part of a more comprehensive immigration reform.

Polis said he thinks larger-scale reform and expanding the H-2B program can be addressed separately, but he said he's optimistic that the next Congress will be able to get work done in both areas.

Compromises for the H-2B program have come very close to passing in the last two legislative sessions, and many people are waiting for the new wave of representatives to come in, Polis said.

"Immigration is something that many people want to see addressed," he said. "If legislators ignore that, they do so at their own peril."

Republican Senate candidate Bob Schaffer said that while he would support the H-2B visa extension bills, he thinks the number of visas issued should be determined by economic analysis.

"He believes we should have a rational, formula-driven, work quota for the H-2B visas, not arbitrary numbers chosen for political gain," said Kelly Brady, Schaffer's press secretary.

Senator Ken Salazar has also supported legislation to extend the H-2B exemptions. He supported bills such as one introduced by Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Maryland, that proposed to make the three-year return worker exemption permanent.

"They're going to continue to fight to get that done before Congress adjourns," said Matt Lee-Ashley, spokesperson for Salazar. "He certainly knows how important this is to businesses around the state, especially those in the ski industry."

Salazar has also worked on more comprehensive immigration reform that includes a citizenship program for immigrants and plans to tightening border security.

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