

# THE TELLURIDE WATCH

Serving the people of Telluride and Mountain Village, Colorado and the surrounding region

## Many Foreign Telski Workers Won't Be Back This Winter

by Gus Jarvis

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### *Ski Areas Caught in Crossfire of Immigration Debate*

TELLURIDE – Many former foreign Telluride Ski and Golf Co. employees will not be returning to work this ski season following an announcement last week by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services that the H-2B visa cap has been met for this winter.

The USCIS officially notified the public that July 29, 2008, was the final receipt date for the new H-2B worker petitions requesting employee start dates prior to April 1, 2009. Telski Chief Executive Officer Dave Riley confirmed on Saturday that the resort's petitions for H-2B Visas had not been submitted prior to the July 29 deadline and that the company is now in the process of using J1 (exchange program) visas.



EMPLOYEE SHORTAGE – The Telluride Ski Resort is losing 55 employees, mostly in the ski school, who previously came to the U.S. on H-2B visas. Telski is attempting to fill those positions with J1 visa employees. (File photo)

"The H-2B cap has been met, which will affect our ability to hire those who use those visas for entry," Riley stated in an email to the Watch. "We are shifting to people who qualify for J1 visas and are having good luck in South America."

Riley said the ski area is losing 55 H-2B visas and all but two were in the ski school.

"We've already hired 45 J1s from South America and are not complete with that recruiting effort," Riley stated. "We also have some other initiatives that we're working on right now."

The USCIS has issued 33,000 H2-B visas bi-annually since 1990. In 2004, Congress allowed returning workers to be exempt from that cap. That exemption for the returning workers expired last September and Congress has since declined to renew it. As a result, many longtime employees including lift operators, snow makers and ski instructors (many who have a longtime clientele base here in Telluride) won't be returning to Telluride this year because they aren't exempt as in previous years.

"The entire ski industry is very upset with the government's inability to extend visas, especially for returning workers," Riley stated. "There are several very talented ski school instructors who will not be able to come back unless Congress does something effective in the near future regarding this problem. It is impacting ski areas across the country in a very negative way."

"The whole issue here is the expiration of the exemption for returning workers," National Ski Area Association President Michael Berry said in an interview on Friday. "The way it used to work and had worked for the previous five or six years was if you had an existing visa, you were exempt from the caps."

Berry didn't yet have any statistics on the number of ski areas that will be affected by this year's H-2B visa cap but said that it is becoming a growing problem for the ski area industry.

"There is, in general, not enough ski instructors to meet the demand," Berry said, "and look who is not coming back...the long-term senior instructors who have a large clientele base, which is very lucrative for the instructor and the company. To

lose that opportunity is very difficult for all concerned. The guest is unhappy because the instructor is now not available. The instructor is unhappy because he or she cannot earn the money and the ski areas owner is unhappy because a significant source of revenue is lost.

"The whole issue for us is immigration reform," he added.

Berry said the NSAA is working to get back the worker exemption for a five-year extension but, "there are a lot of interests involved." He also said the ski area industry has a unique category of employees that may not fit into the national immigration debate.

"Ski area employees aren't necessarily generalists," Berry said. "They are ski instructors and snowmakers and are a unique category of their own. There are a whole lot of views of immigration here. You have the folks who want to build a fence at the boarder and have no immigration. You have the Hispanic caucus that has a lot of different elements. Ski areas are caught in the middle."

Riley agreed.

"The ski industry is caught in the middle of a much larger immigration debate on capital hill," he stated. "Our approach is to adapt to these changing circumstances with a positive approach and long-term view."

While it remains uncertain how many foreign Telski employees won't be returning to the Telluride Ski Area or to other Telluride businesses that had not made the deadline, Riley said he is confident the ski area will be fully staffed this season.

"Nevertheless, we are implementing alternatives and are confident that we will be able to fully staff our operations and offer the same high level of service people have come to expect from Telluride Ski and Golf," Riley stated.