

Telluride, Colo.: Lack of visas drains workforce

The nationwide cap on H-2B visas was reached in late July, leaving many ski areas out in the cold. This means many long-time seasonal workers from other countries won't return to teach skiing, as well as work other ski area jobs.

Telluride, for example, is losing 55 employees who had worked under the H-2B visa program. All but two were ski instructors.

Instead, says Dave Riley, the chief operating officer of the ski company, Telluride already has hired 45 employees from South America with student visas under the J1 program.

Vail Resorts had sought to bring 1,900 seasonal workers into the United States through the H-2B program for its five ski areas in Colorado and California. However, only a few visas were granted for early season employees, such as snowmakers. The company employs 15,000 people at peak season.

The Vail Daily notes that in 2007, Vail Resorts had sought to hire 2,200 employees under the H-2B program, about a third of them ski instructors and nearly a thousand short-order cooks, lift operators, hotel clerks and housekeepers.

Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association, told the Telluride Watch that the loss of ski instructors hits ski areas hardest.

"Look who is not coming back ... the long-term ski instructors who have a large clientele base, which is very lucrative for the instructor and the company."

The ski industry sees itself being caught in the national debate about immigration reform.

"You have the folks who want to build a fence at the border and have no immigration," said Berry. "You have the Hispanic caucus that has a lot of different elements. Ski areas are caught in the middle."