

SkiCo applauds visa change

by **Brent Gardner-Smith**, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

Friday, March 7, 2008

The Aspen Skiing Co. is poised to reap the benefit of a federal change in one type of temporary work visa it uses to hire its workforce.

"This was our toughest year maybe ever, and certainly is going to be our toughest spring," said Jim Laing, head of the company's human resources division. "We are under(staffed)."

Laing said he is heartened by recent changes to what are known as J1 visas for students from Australia and New Zealand. Until recently, J1 visas allowed a prospective employee to come to the United States to work for SkiCo for three or four months, which meant he or she could not stay for a full winter season. That increased hiring and training costs for the employer.

But J1 visas for Aussies and Kiwis have recently been extended by the U.S. State Department for up to 12 months, which should make it easier for SkiCo to staff up next winter. It should also add more good-natured folks from Down Under to the resort's mix of international workers.

"Before, it was for just active students during their summer break," Laing said. But now the J1 visa is being made available to people from ages 19 to 29 who are either actively enrolled in school or have graduated with a degree, a similar requirement to the H2B visa, the other popular tool SkiCo uses for hiring. Additionally, there will be no cap on the number of J1 visas issued to citizens of Australia and New Zealand.

The number of H2B visas in the U.S. is capped at 66,000 annually, and an exemption that used to allow H2B visas to roll over has expired and has not been renewed by Congress.

That cost SkiCo approximately 100 employees in its hospitality business this winter, but did not affect on-mountain staffing levels, Laing said.

SkiCo employs 3,500 people at peak winter season, and only about half of new seasonal hires return for another year.

The company runs the four upvalley ski areas as well as The Little Nell hotel and the Snowmass Club, and hires approximately 1,500 new people each winter. However, with the H2B visa a scarce commodity this winter, SkiCo ultimately hired more people on J1 visas, even though many of them could not be here for both the beginning and end of the season.

"You usually have to have two people to make it through a full season," Laing said. "We ended up putting more people on the payroll, which includes more hires, more paperwork. It's not ideal."

Laing also thinks next winter might be a bit easier because the company should have more employee housing to work with.

"We believe we are going to have more beds next year," Laing said. "And a bed is the closest thing to a silver bullet in regard to staffing issues."

The company is hoping that Related WestPac will finish building the project known as Club Commons II next to the Snowmass Club by next winter. SkiCo was responsible for gaining the approvals for the project, and Related WestPac is in charge of construction. Club Commons II will include 124 employee beds, and, of those, SkiCo will have access to at least 96.

In addition, the company plans to rebuild the Holiday House employee housing complex in Aspen, which was ruined in a fire just before the ski season started.

bgs@aspendedailynews.com