



Vail Daily

VR: Longtime instructors won't be on mountain

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VAIL — Visa troubles will leave some skiers without their favorite ski instructors next winter, according to an e-mail sent to Vail Resorts employees Tuesday.

"We should note that many of the impacted employees are longtime ski instructors, many of whom have long-standing relationships with some of our most valued guests," wrote Mark Gasta, senior vice president and chief human resources officer for Vail Resorts. "We should certainly expect these guests to share in our disappointment with this news."

Most of Vail Resorts' foreign employees were not approved to work with the company next winter, the e-mail said. The company was not even able to apply for H-2B visas for its seasonal workers this year before a nationwide cap was reached, Gasta said.

"With our ski season not beginning until November, we are not allowed to get the process started until July 1 and thus were not able to file our applications ... before the cap was reached," Gasta said.

Many resorts affected

Under exemptions that had been in place in previous years, returning H-2B workers didn't count toward a yearly cap of 66,000 visas per year nationwide. But Congress let that exemption expire this year, making it harder for local employees to fit under the cap.

The nationwide cap was reached last week.

The scarcity of H-2B visas will affect ski resorts not just in Colorado but across the East and West, said Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association.

"Particularly when it comes to certain skilled positions, specifically ski and board instructors that have developed a long-term relationship with people, instructors who work the opposite season in Australia and New Zealand and Chile," Berry said.

Across the country, ski resorts are seeing a "very small percentage" of H-2B applications approved, he said.

Kelly Ladyga, spokeswoman for Vail Resorts, said the company will turn to other recruiting initiatives to make sure it is well staffed for the coming winter. It will hold more job fairs nationwide, recruit more at colleges and summer resorts such as Nantucket, create a new Web site and turn to social-networking sites to find workers, Ladyga said. It also hired a new director of recruiting, she added.

"We are confident, given the very aggressive, comprehensive recruiting campaign we have already launched nationwide, we will be staffed to deliver the exceptional experience that our guests have come to expect from us," Ladyga said.

Vail Resorts hopes to see the affected employees return in 2009-10, she added.

A wider immigration debate

The National Ski Areas Association has been trying to find a legislative solution to the H-2B issue without success, Berry said. The issue is wrapped in the larger, heated immigration-reform debate, he said.

"Everybody has an opinion about how the H-2B visa fits into the process," Berry said.

Last year, H-2B and J-1 workers made up fewer than 10 percent of Vail Resorts' peak employment of 14,000. That included all five of the company's ski mountains and its hotels.

Last winter, J-1 visas expired April 1, and many mountain workers on J-1s left a few weeks before that so they could travel before returning to school.

Next year, the busy Easter holiday will be April 12.

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