

Visa cap leaves ski resorts short-staffed

By Molly Rettig , Special to the Rocky

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Dennis Schroeder / The Rocky

Reginaldo Schonherr shovels new snow off steps at Loveland Ski Area on Friday. Ski towns are scrambling to find employees since a limit was placed on the number of foreign workers allowed into the U.S.

Colorado's ski resorts and businesses are bracing for a busy month, thanks to generous snowfall and the March pileup of spring break weeks combined with an early Easter.

Whether they will be staffed to handle the crowds is another story because of a shortage of foreign workers.

Specialty Sports, which owns Boulder Ski Deals, as well as stores in nearly every Colorado ski town, said it lost 150 visas for foreign workers this year, the first time in more than 12 years the company was denied visas.

The company scrambled to use people on student visas to fill the gap, but those workers now are peeling away to go back to school or travel before returning home, said recruiting manager Betsy Salzler.

The Vail and Beaver Creek outlets will be hit hardest during spring break, about 10 to 15 workers short, Salzler said. "We're going to send some Front Range employees up to help out," she said.

Ski towns have scrambled to find employees since last fall when Congress limited the number of foreign workers allowed into the country. Businesses found temporary replacements while they lobbied lawmakers to pass a bill that would help the worker program for at least several more years.

The issue was tangled in immigration reform that was never passed, leaving employers wondering whether next year will be as frantic as this year.

"Anytime that you lose 25 percent of your prospective employee slots, that obviously will have an effect on your businesses," said Tom Balk, vice president of Colorado Mountain Express, an airport transportation service for Summit, Pitkin and Roaring Fork counties.

Colorado Mountain Express is one of the ski industry's many service and hospitality businesses left short-staffed when Congress changed the rules of the H-2B program.

U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services caps the number of H-2B visas at 66,000 each year - 33,000 are issued beginning Oct. 1 and 33,000 beginning April 1. Colorado businesses applied for more H-2Bs in 2006 than all but two other states, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

About 3,000 of those H-2Bs go to ski resorts in the state each year.

To meet the national demand for seasonal workers, Congress created the Returning Worker Provision in 2005, which exempted anyone who had worked on an H-2B visa in the past three years from the 66,000 cap.

The exemption nearly doubles the number of H-2B workers allowed into the country, according to the National Ski Areas Association, giving employers much bigger pools to hire from.

When the exemption expired in September, returning workers became subject to the 33,000 cap for this ski season. That quota was reached Sept. 27, before some H-2B employers even submitted paperwork to the government.

"That is the crux of the issue, changing the way the implementation and counting was done without any knowledge to the users," Balk said.

Colorado Mountain Express has increased its H-2B numbers from seven to 185 over the past eight years. When denied 25 visas this season, CME lost 17 percent of its foreign workers at the last minute. The service hires seasonal workers as drivers, reservationists and airport employees and plans vehicle fleets and employee housing around its expected numbers.

"The impact is not just bodies. (It) affects our entire business planning cycle and ultimately our ability to drive revenue," Balk said.

Employers patched up holes in staffing by recruiting more American workers and more foreign workers on J-1 visas. Both have shortcomings.

Businesses have a hard time finding Americans to fill seasonal positions because of the high cost of living and low unemployment in mountain towns. Students on J-1 visas go back to school come February and March, whereas H-2B visas last for six to 10 months and ride out the ski season.

Brian Culp, who manages and hires for Charter Sports' nine Vail Valley shops, said 30 percent of his 115 employees are on visas and that he relied on more J-1s this year.

"H2Bs are more mature people, not kids who want to party every night," Culp said.

Because his workers on J-1s leave March 15, Culp plans to work every day for the next month. He has managed to scrape together 10 new hires.

"Lots of talking to people in the lift line," he explained.

A springtime of shuffling staff across two mountain passes could be avoided next year if Congress reforms the H-2B bill next fall, business owners say.

But Balk for one isn't optimistic.

"I see nothing happening," he said. "In an election year there will be a lot of rhetoric, but if we didn't get the revised legislation done prior to Congress going home . . . it's not going to get done."

If so, businesses are likely to be more punctual next season with their recruiting and paperwork to beat the cap.

Melanie Mills, spokeswoman for Colorado Ski Country USA, said this means traditional early birds, such as Vail Resorts, won't get all the H-2Bs.

"There will be one big lottery for those 33,000," she said.

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