

Lawmakers seek more visas for low-skilled seasonal workers

By [EUNICE MOSCOSO](#)

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WASHINGTON — GOP lawmakers said Tuesday they would try to force a bill to the House floor to increase seasonal visas for foreign workers.

An array of businesses — including crab farmers, beach resorts, and construction firms — could suffer greatly if Congress fails to increase the temporary visas for low-skilled employees known as H-2B's, the lawmakers said.

Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Fla., said that the hospitality and tourism business as well as the seafood industry could be hurt badly in his state, especially over the busy summer season.

Some businesses in a number of states could be forced to lay off permanent U.S. workers or even close down, lawmakers said.

"They all depend on this labor force to meet peak demand," said Rep. Charles Boustany, R-La., at a Capitol Hill press conference.

Rep. Jim Gerlach, R-Pa., said that landscape and nursery businesses in his state could lose \$26 million in revenues and 300 permanent jobs without the temporary workers.

The House members are backing a provision that would increase the number of H-2B visas.

The measure, authored by Democrat Bart Stupak of Michigan, would allow foreign workers who used the program over the past three years to return legally without counting against the 66,000 visa cap. This would effectively double the number of workers in the program, proponents said.

Boustany said that the Congressional Hispanic Caucus is pressuring Democratic leaders to stall the legislation because it is seeking a broader immigration reform.

The caucus supports an increase in H-2B visas as part of a larger package that would include a path to citizenship for current illegal immigrants and create a large temporary worker program for foreigners.

The Republican lawmakers said that they would try to use a procedural maneuver known as a "discharge petition" to bring the Stupak legislation directly to the floor. It is unclear whether they will be able to collect the 218 necessary signatures to move the petition forward.

"At the very least it deserves a debate and an up or down vote," said Putnam, who chairs the House Republican Conference.

Also Tuesday, several House Democrats held a briefing on the need for stronger labor protections in the H-2B visa program.

Last year, the Southern Poverty Law Center likened the H-2B program and a similar one for foreign agricultural workers to a "modern day system of indentured servitude."

In a report, the center said that the foreign workers were routinely cheated out of wages, forced to live in squalid conditions, and denied medical care for workplace injuries.

The Department of Labor, which administers the programs, said that the Southern Poverty Law Center report had many inaccuracies.