

4-15-08

## H2B cap leaves many jobs open in tourism industry

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) -- Some Black Hills tourist businesses are finding it harder to fill seasonal jobs because of limits on the number of foreign workers allowed in the United States.

Many of them come to the U.S. through the H2B program, which set a cap of 66,000 workers a few years ago.

The temporary foreign workers are valuable to the tourist industry, said Bill Honerkamp, president of Black Hills, Badlands & Lakes Association.

"They work hard, and they will work all the hours they can," he said. "They'll take jobs that go begging from applicants locally."

The cap was reached four years ago, according to Sandie Azinger of Hot Springs, who heads International Hospitality Resources Agency, which recruits and places foreign workers. Then the cap was split, with 33,000 allowed in the winter months and 33,000 for the summer, Azinger said.

"As people have learned about this seasonal work force and as more employers want to hire legally, more employers have turned to this as a resource for seasonal staffing," Azinger said. "There's a shortage all over the country."

That has made it difficult to get enough foreign workers, according to Azinger and others in the Black Hills tourist industry.

"One of my clients normally would have about 175 people," Azinger said. "They're sitting at just over 100. The only reason they have as many as they do is they've been in the program six years and they have a lot of people who come back every summer."

Xanterra Parks & Resorts, the company that has the concessions at Mount Rushmore, originally sought 30 foreign workers for this summer under H2B but dropped that request to 15 when the cap was reached, according to Xanterra human resources manager Paulette Rooney.

Rooney said Xanterra would make up the difference with foreign workers through another program, which is used primarily by foreign students to come to the U.S. to work. But they are typically limited to only three or four months, she said.

At Custer State Park, Regency Hotel Management will be about 40 workers short this year, according to general manager Josh Schmaltz. Last year, about 140 foreign workers were included in the about 300 Regency employees, Schmaltz said. They do tasks including housekeeping, cooking, food serving, staffing the front desk and maintaining the grounds.

Stepped-up recruiting efforts among area college students may help fill some of the positions, but not all, Schmaltz said. "We're going to have to push through the season without them."

In 2005, 61 employers sought to fill 1,161 positions with foreign workers under the H2B program, according to state Labor Department figures. The high-water mark for H2B in South Dakota was 2004, when 92 employers had 1,689 openings. In 2000, just 17 companies were involved, and they had only 235 jobs to fill.