



## Mini-Cassia quarries face labor shortage due to immigration debate in Congress

Thursday, February 07, 2008

By Sven Berg/South Idaho Press

Local business leaders are pressuring the nation's lawmakers to extend provisions in immigration law that allow staffing of Mini-Cassia's stone quarries with seasonal workers.

Seasonal workers carrying H2-B visas are allowed to enter the country for nine months at a time. Under current laws, as many as 66,000 H2-B visas can be issued each year. In 2005, Congress passed the Save Our Small Business Act (SOSBA), which exempted returning H2-B workers from the cap of 66,000.

But SOSBA expired in September 2007, and local quarry owners say they will likely be forced to scale back production this year if it is not extended.

Greg Osterhout, co-owner of Oakley's Northern Stone Supply, Inc., said a reduction in his operations will send a ripple effect through the community that may cost jobs in other sectors.

"Little ripples in a small community are big ripples," he said. "It's going to affect everybody. It's going to affect the fuel companies. It's going to affect the parts companies."

In a Jan. 25 letter to Sen. Larry Craig, Adams Petroleum, Inc. co-owner Kelly Adams supported Osterhout's statements about a negative ripple effect in the local economy if SOSBA is not renewed. He said his company's business dealings with Mini-Cassia stone quarries in 2007 generated gross receipts of more than \$387,000.

Opposition to SOSBA and similar laws has historically come from labor unions and other groups seeking to protect domestic workers from competing for jobs with foreign hires. They contend SOSBA is used by businesses to hire cheap labor while taking jobs away from U.S. citizens.

Representatives of several Idaho chapters of labor unions declined to comment on SOSBA Monday. Others did not return phone calls.

Beth Vasquez, co-owner of O&A Stone in Longmont, Colo., said the H2-B program is specifically designed to not put domestic workers in conflict with foreign workers. She said employers enrolled in the H2-B program are required to advertise openings locally and give hiring preference to U.S. citizens.

"Any American worker is who is willing to work and able to work, we have to give them the job first and foremost," she said. "Honestly, when we advertise n when we are filling these jobs n typically we don't get any response."

Vasquez said, of the remaining few domestic workers who inquire about quarry jobs, "nine out of 10" decline to take the jobs after learning how demanding they are.

Furthermore, both Osterhout and Vasquez said, stripping quarries and other seasonal employers of the ability to hire H2-B workers may lead to illegal hiring of undocumented workers.

"I think that's a pretty obvious answer. People are going to hire who they need to hire when they're pushed into it," Osterhout said. "It's getting so hard these days to find anybody, period, whether they're documented or undocumented."

Vasquez agreed.

"People all across the country will do what they have to do to stay in business," she said.

Vasquez said she likes to hire returning workers n those who would be exempt from normal H2-B caps n because they already

know crucial safety protocol for working in quarries.

Osterhout said H2-B employers are also required to pay workers at a rate no lower than an industry standard set by state authorities. For quarry workers in Idaho, that means \$9.39 per hour. But Osterhout said he and many other quarries pay workers according to the number of tons of rock they process.

"Lots of them make much more than \$9 because they work hard and they're very good at what they do," he said.

Osterhout estimated Mini-Cassia's quarries hire about 300 H2-B workers each year.