



Quarries fear labor shortage

Saturday, February 09, 2008

By Sven Berg/South Idaho Press

In a case some say will have deep-reaching consequences for Mini-Cassia's economy, Idaho Department of Labor Director Roger Madsen has sent letters to Idaho's congressmen, urging them to support legislation that would allow employers to freely hire returning seasonal non-agricultural workers.

Under current laws, employers nationwide can annually hire up to 66,000 workers carrying H2-B visas, which permit seasonal non-agricultural work in the United States. Last year, 90 Idaho employers were allowed to hire 2,200 H2-B workers.

The 2005 Save Our Small Business Act (SOSBA), which exempted H2-B workers from the cap of 66,000 if they were rehired the next year by the same business, expired in September and has yet to be renewed by congress.

Meanwhile, the cap on H2-B workers for next year has already been met. This means seasonal employers who hire summertime help and cannot apply for H2-B workers until January will be unable to hire returning workers unless a new SOSBA or other exemption bill is passed.

In Mini-Cassia this mostly affects stone quarries, which collectively hire hundreds of H2-B workers each summer for six-month tenures.

Greg Osterhout, owner of Northern Stone Supply in Oakley, said if congress does not pass SOSBA, stone quarries throughout southern Idaho will be hit hard and left to hire undocumented immigrant labor.

"It just really would leave us in a situation where we can't operate," he said. "There's a plethora of people that are not legal U.S. workers that we've avoided hiring. It may force us into a position where we have to consider hiring all comers."

Passage of a new SOSBA has been opposed by labor unions and other groups whose goal is to protect American workers from competition with foreign hires. They contend the H2-B program is a means of hiring cheap labor while taking jobs away from U.S. citizens.

But SOSBA proponents say most seasonal jobs offered to H2-B participants are open to citizens first, but most are reluctant to take jobs on a temporary or seasonal basis.

Oakley Valley Stone owner Jim Burch said his business has relied on H2-B workers for years and he, too, is unsure how he will respond if an exemption bill is not passed.

"I don't know n we haven't crossed that bridge," he said. "But it will affect the southern Idaho economy."

Osterhout said he is frustrated Idaho's congressmen have not pushed harder to pass the exemption bill. He said he is concerned political posturing in Washington has become more important to congress than ensuring the nation's prosperity and will delay the bill's passage or kill it altogether.

"The only way to get (the bill) to go through is to put it on a war bill or another hot topic bill, and then you've got a president who's against anything that comes from the House or Senate that's sponsored by the Democratic Party," he said. "And so, it's just an absolute stalemate right now."