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News

## Visa limit hits Sun Valley

### Ski industry out in the cold on H2-B program

By **GREG STAHL**  
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Sun Valley Co. will find itself employing about 100 fewer foreign workers in the 2008-09 winter season because a cap in a nationwide visa program was reached July 29, the earliest it has been met since the program began in 1990.

The 66,000 limit for H2-B visas has left a number of other ski areas out in the cold as well, as long-time seasonal employees from other countries won't return to teach skiing or work other ski area jobs.

"It will definitely affect us," said Sun Valley Co. Personnel Manager Matt Parke. "We sometimes hire 200-plus H2-B employees, and with extensions we'll be about half that."

Parke said that in the peak of winter, Sun Valley has about 400 foreign employees on the payroll. The company's entire workforce is about 1,700.

Parke said H2-B visas are for non-agricultural, temporary jobs for which U.S. workers are not available. About half the company's foreign employees carry H2-B visas.

"Other ski resorts, particularly ones in Colorado, rely heavily on H2-B ski instructors, but we never did as much," he said.

Telluride, for example is losing 55 employees who worked under the H-2B visa program. All but two were ski instructors. Instead, said Telluride Chief Operating Officer Dave Riley, the company has already hired 45 employees from South America with student visas under the J1 program.

Sun Valley also hires foreign employees using J1 visas, which Parke said are work-and-travel visas for college students who want to spend a season away from school.

It's not the first winter the H-2B visa shortage has hit Sun Valley. Last year, too, the company had to make up the difference when the nationwide cap of 66,000 was met.

"We've just focused a little more attention on domestic hiring," Parke said. "We've tried to attend more universities in the springtime. We've looked at areas where unemployment might be a little higher and drag from those regions."

Sun Valley has also petitioned the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services for extensions for its current H2-B visa employees.

Parke echoed a sentiment expressed by the American Hotel and Lodging Association urging Congress to consider a previously enacted relief provision allowing returning H2-B employees who to not count toward the cap. According to the association, the cap was first reached in 2004 only six months into the fiscal year. Congress then passed the relief program in 2005.

"Because of these political obstructions, seasonal lodging properties throughout the country continue to be denied access to the temporary workers they need to run their properties effectively during their busiest times of the year," an association press release states. "These shortages put many of those properties and their full-time workers in jeopardy."

Vail Resorts in Colorado is among the hardest-hit companies. Vail had sought to bring 1,900 seasonal workers into the United States through the H-2B program for its five ski areas in Colorado and California. However, only a few visas were granted for early-season employees, such as snowmakers. The company employs 15,000 people at peak season.



Express photo by David N. Seelig

The Vail Daily noted that in 2007, Vail Resorts had sought to hire 2,200 employees under the H2B program. About a third of them were ski instructors, but nearly a thousand were short-order cooks, lift operators, hotel clerks and housekeepers.

Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association, told the Telluride Watch early in August that the loss of ski instructors hits ski areas hardest.

"Look who is not coming back ... the long-term ski instructors who have a large clientele base, which is very lucrative for the instructor and the company," he said.

The ski industry sees itself caught in the national debate about immigration reform.

"You have the folks who want to build a fence at the border and have no immigration," said Berry. "You have the Hispanic caucus that has a lot of different elements. Ski areas are caught in the middle."

*Mountain Town News contributed to this article.*