

# THE DAILY ADVERTISER

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## Cap on guest-worker visas hurts state

People who come from Mexico to work in the U.S. on the federal H-2B Guest-Worker Visa Program have been extremely valuable to industry in this country. But a cap on the number of guest-worker visas is being felt in a harsh manner here in south Louisiana - particularly by the seafood-processing industry.

Congress, caught up in the illegal-immigrant debate, seems unaware of the value of these legal immigrants, or of the effect of the low cap on guest visas. Currently, the cap is at 66,000 guest visas. Employers can bring in H-2B guest workers for many seasonal non-agriculture jobs like seafood processing only after an extensive process proves no American wants the job.

Businesses involving some of the most tedious labor imaginable can't find locals to do the job, but still they must go through a long process of advertising job openings locally before they're allowed to apply for guest workers.

The 66,000 guest visas didn't last long this year. They were taken by Jan. 2.

Another questionable restriction mandates that applications for guest workers can't be filed until four months before they would begin working.

Because of that, many seafood processors weren't able to apply for workers this year before the 66,000 maximum was reached.

Congress has contributed to the problem by allowing a sensible exemption to expire. The exemption was given to workers who had long-term relationships with a U.S. employer.

Allowing the exemption to expire was part of the political game. The Hispanic Caucus, which includes 24 House Democrats, wouldn't accept any legislation short of overall immigration reform.

There is the possibility of some relief in the bill called the Save our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act. Trade associations are pushing vigorously for the bill, versions of which are before both houses of Congress now.

Seafood processing, a strong element of Louisiana's economy, is being devastated by the worker shortage. In many cases, U.S. workers don't want the jobs, and the cap on immigrants shuts out the Mexican guest workers who would be eager to do them. The seasonal nature of seafood processing keeps many U.S. workers from applying.

U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, has labeled the situation a crisis. He says he is a proponent of a bill to fix the problems. There are bipartisan efforts to force the bill onto the floor. If legislation is not passed, Boustany said, "This is going to be an economic disaster for Louisiana."

The situation is becoming a national dilemma, with every state feeling the impact. South Louisiana, however, will continue to feel a crippling effect because of an economy weakened by the 2005 hurricanes.

We strongly support Boustany and the lawmakers from both sides of the aisle who are battling to separate guest workers from illegal immigrants.