

## Fight for guest workers goes on Workforce Assistance Act introduced

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U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-New Iberia) introduced a bill earlier this month to try and restore a feature to the federal H-2B visa program that would allow roughly 100,000 "veteran" guest workers back into the country, as they have been since 2004.

Hundreds of businesses in South Louisiana fear an economic slowdown if they can't apply for seasonal guest workers for work like seafood peeling, sugar boiling and housekeeping - all jobs filled only after proving no American will do them at a prevailing wage. The H-2B Visa program, which caps at 66,000 national guest workers per year, has been lost in the shuffle of a larger illegal immigration debate.

On April 17, Melancon introduced his Seasonal Workforce Assistance Act, and testified before a House Judiciary Committee subcommittee in support of passing a short-term extension of the H-2B returning worker exemption, which this bill would do and had been passed in 2005 and 2006 by Congress.

Past exceptions have let 100,000 or more additional guest workers in the country who had long-standing relationships with a U.S. employer. That exception was squashed in 2007 by a strong Hispanic Caucus, comprised of 24 legislators, who have said they want no guest worker bills passed short of full immigration reform.

After filing on April 17, the bill was assigned the House Judiciary Committee, which deals with any immigration-related issues. A majority vote from that committee would move it up for vote consideration on the House floor, only if House leadership chose to give it floor time. No Louisiana representatives are in the committee.

"The time it takes for a vote is completely up to committees and leadership," said Robin Winchell, Melancon's spokeswoman. "If there's enough pressure on members, I've seen legislation move in and out of the house in a month."

The last three years this exemption was passed by the House, it wasn't as a standalone bill like Melancon's. Often, the bill is folded into another bill that is relevant, added as an amendment. "There are many paths to enacting it," Winchell said.

U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany (R-Lafayette) filed a House resolution in early March attempting to force a Michigan representative's pro-guest worker bill to the floor for a vote. House members didn't act on Boustany's resolution in the required time.