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Gulf Coast businesses are starved for seasonal workers

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SHORT HANDED

Gulf Coast businesses are starved for seasonal workers, but calls to allow more visas are tied up in the immigration battle

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WASHINGTON -- Situated on Louisiana's Gulf Coast, Harvest Time Seafood has ready access to some of nation's most bountiful fishing grounds. But since January, the processing plant has been importing its crabmeat from Colombia.

Even at \$8 to \$9 an hour, no locals are interested in the job of stripping the succulent meat out of the crab shells, a tedious process known as "picking." In the past, Harvest Time has employed Mexican workers on temporary visas to do the job, but this year they can't get across the border.

The annual quota for seasonal workers has been reached and Congress' past willingness to raise the cap has gotten tied up in a politically divisive fight over illegal immigration.

"We are right in the middle of 'Seafood City USA' and we are having to import crabmeat from Colombia," Harvest Time owner Kevin Dartez said. "That don't make no sense."

Thousands of seasonal businesses all over the country -- from shipyards along the Gulf to canneries on the West Coast to lobster trappers in Maine -- are pressing Congress to raise the 66,000 annual cap on H-2B visas, which is issued to temporary workers.

For the past several years, Congress has been happy to oblige in order to sate the demand from worker-starved businesses in almost every congressional district. In fiscal year 2006, an additional 50,000 foreign workers were allowed into the United States on a temporary basis. But the exemption expired Sept. 30 and hasn't been renewed.

Reform-battle backdrop

The push-back this time isn't from conservative Republicans concerned about illegal immigration, but among Democrats, particularly those in the Hispanic Caucus, who fear that extending the popular program will take the steam out of more comprehensive immigration reform.

The objections have proved a political headache to Democrats who count on Hispanic voter support and don't want to alienate a key voting bloc, especially in an election year.

Hispanic Caucus Chairman Rep. Joe Baca, D-Calif., said providing assistance to U.S. businesses reliant on foreign labor should be considered alongside other, thornier immigrant issues, such as what to do with the 12 million illegal immigrants in the country and how to plug porous border security.

"I can appreciate that many businesses -- from health providers to landscapers, and from the hospitality industry to the fishing industry -- need Congress to address H-2B visas to help ensure their success," Baca said. "I recognize that H-2B visa fixes are an important part of the immigration crisis, but that should be just another check mark in the column as to why this Congress must take real action on immigration reform."

But comprehensive immigration change has proved politically difficult. A bipartisan plan to provide a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants unraveled last year in the face of complaints from conservative Republicans that better enforcement should take priority.

Exemption fulfills demand

Unlike visas for seasonal agricultural workers, the number available for immigrants seeking nonfarm jobs was capped by Congress in 1990. For years the 66,000 seemed to suffice. But a shortage of willing American labor prompted growing interest in the program, and in 2004 Congress was asked to expand it. Lawmakers agreed to allow workers who had entered the country before on H-2B visas and legally returned to their own nations to re-enter without counting against the cap. The exemption expired last fall.

Kelly Couch, a consultant in Louisiana who helps businesses apply for the visas, said it's not that companies are trying to avoid hiring American workers. She said that on the Gulf Coast after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, well-paying jobs associated with the recovery are so plentiful that local workers can afford to be choosy.

Even if visas are available, she said, it's not easy to get them. Companies first have to advertise the position in a local newspaper so Americans can get first crack at the job. The federal application process is complicated, minimum wages are set by the government, and the fees to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security are \$1,470 per company.

"Everyone assumes this is a cheap way to get around employing U.S. workers," Couch said. "It's not. American workers aren't willing to do these jobs."

Big 'strain' on industries

The economic impact of a worker shortage reaches far beyond a single firm. Hutco Inc., a marine services company, has for a decade employed H-2B workers at shipyards along the Gulf Coast. Even before the company could place ads for American workers this year, the cap had been met.

"It has put a real strain on our company as well as local vendors in town: the rental companies, vendors in the shipyards, paint guys, local tool guys, hotel guys," Hutco Vice President Scott Hutchison said.

Despite the need, Congress has been slow to take up the issue. An attempt to expand the allotment of H-2B visas was blocked in November, largely because of objections from the Hispanic Caucus.

Two bills have lingered for nearly a year. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., has a bill with 141 co-sponsors, and a companion in the Senate by Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., has 43. Both enjoy broad bipartisan support but haven't moved.

La. lawmakers weigh in

Some are concerned that Stupak's plan would call for a permanent exemption from the cap. Among them is Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, who said a permanent exemption would create an ever-growing population of immigrant labor and possibly crowd out American workers.

"This is a guest-worker program," said Melancon, who supports a one-year exemption. "We don't need to make it permanent and flood the market."

Melancon's home-state colleague, Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, is pushing for quick action on the Stupak legislation. He has filed a discharge petition, and if he gets 218 signatures, it would force the House leadership to schedule a vote.

Melancon dismissed the petition as a "political tool" meant to make the Democratic leadership look bad and expose rifts in the party. But Boustany said he is trying to answer a pressing, and growing, need.

"This is a huge issue in our district," he said. "I will use every tool possible to force this."

He and all the immigrant-reliant companies around the nation will have to wait. It doesn't appear that the House or Senate will take up legislation this week before Congress leaves for a two-week recess.

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