

THE DAILY ADVERTISER

Sunday, March 2, 2008

Industries in crisis

Lack of workers to pick, process and peel could be devastating

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Spanish gospel music should be echoing through the halls of Abbeville's Harvest Time Seafood.

This crab and crawfish processing plant is normally bustling by now with young men and women from Mexico, their aprons damp and fingers cold, plucking seafood meat out of tiny shells. Most call this their second home, working year after year for owner Kevin Dartez during harvest season under the federal H-2B Guest-Worker Visa Program.

They'd pay taxes, contribute to Social Security and return home at the end of the harvest. Employers can bring in H-2B guest workers for many seasonal non-agriculture jobs like food processing, only after an extensive process proves no American wants the job.

But guest workers have been lost in the shuffle of the illegal immigration debate, resurfacing just as many realize how an unrealistically low cap of 66,000 guest visas has put the U.S. economy in danger.

Go visit Dartez today and see his empty tables. He's got time to kill, and can give you a tour of his barren coolers, an unused cooker, the new oyster division he can't start and everything else 50 guest workers would be doing for Harvest Time right now.

His story is just the prologue of a potential nightmare for South Louisiana, where hundreds of businesses in seafood, agriculture and tourism predict financial ruin unless an emergency Congressional effort forces a fix to the guest worker backlog.

Political wrangling slows bill

It's a national dilemma hitting nearly every state in their own ways. But South Louisiana will feel a particularly significant impact, business leaders and public officials say, because of its fragile post-Katrina economy, and seasonal nature of many businesses that makes hiring U.S. citizens tough.

"These (foreign workers) are helping you run your country, can't you understand that?" Dartez said. "I've tried to employ Louisianans and they just won't learn, they won't commit. They want paid under the table, and I don't do that. But these Mexicans work hard and are honest."

The last 33,000 of the year's 66,000 H-2B visas were taken by Jan. 2. Many seafood processors didn't even get to apply for workers before all the spots were gone (you can't apply until four months before the work would start).



Photos by Leslie Westbrook/lwestbrook@theadvertiser.com

John Hebert, one of the handful of employees currently working at Harvest Time Seafood, rolls out pallets of crawfish and crab bait to thaw Friday morning before a customer arrives to pick it up. Businesses like Harvest Time Seafood are in a slump because of restrictions on illegal immigration.

Three of many Louisiana industries that will be affected by shortage of guest workers

Sugarcane industry uses H-2B guest workers in a variety of roles in sugar mills, most notably as sugar boilers who monitor the syrup as it's boiled down.

Rice mills in Louisiana and other states hire more guest workers each year for jobs like bagging, sorting and testing rice when its delivered.

Crawfish, crab, oyster, shrimp and alligator processors rely heavily on guest workers for everything from meat-picking to truck deliveries.

Speak to Congress

U.S. House Rep. Charles Boustany is a vocal proponent of renewing the H-2B visa program, and a co-sponsor of House Bill 1843. He says Louisianians should pressure their legislators and governor to speak out on the issue:

- Sen. David Vitter (R-La.), 202-224-4623
- Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.), 202-224-5824 (listed as cosponsor of Senate Bill 988)
- Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-New Iberia), 202-225-4031
- Gov. Bobby Jindal, 225-342-7015

In the past two years this wouldn't have been a problem. Congress had been awarding an exemption for workers who had long-term relationships with a U.S. employer (122,541 workers came in 2006).

But that exemption wasn't renewed in December, when the Hispanic Caucus, which includes 24 House Democrats, wouldn't accept any legislation short of overall immigration reform.

Trade associations are pushing a bill named the Save our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act (two versions, HR 1843 and S 988). Legalized seasonal foreign labor is absolutely needed, they say, and both sides win.

Businesses involving some of the most tedious labor imaginable can't find locals to do the job, and must go through an extensive process of advertising job openings locally before they're allowed to apply for guest workers. In the end a business grows, consumers get cheap goods, and foreign workers earn more than they'd ever dream of at home.

The bills have sat untouched for months, avoided by House and Senate leaders because of "political influence" of the Hispanic Caucus, said Michael Hensgens, a local feed store operator and legislative chairman of the Crawfish Processors Alliance.

"It's a crisis, and I'm a proponent of a bill to fix this that has strong bipartisan support in the House," said U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette. "We're talking about bipartisan efforts to force it to the House floor. ... Because this is going to be an economic disaster for Louisiana."

Issue is not black and white

The H-2B program, like other guest-worker programs, has its controversy. The Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, a longtime advocate for migrant laborers and guest workers, published a 50-page report last year titled, "Close to Slavery - Guest Worker Programs in the U.S."

Cornell University professor emeritus Vernon M. Briggs, a labor economist, has said H-2B is akin to "indentured servitude." Proponents say there are abusive employers, but that negative brush shouldn't be used to paint everyone as slave drivers.

Dartez and any other H-2B applicant faces a stringent process that guarantees prevailing wages (above minimum wage) are paid to guest workers. Local seafood processors say they help set up workers in apartments and find bilingual aides. Dartez, a born-again Christian who married a Mexican immigrant, also takes his workers to Spanish-language church service.

Come April 1, those employers using illegal workers will be rewarded with more orders and more revenue, while Dartez keeps half his Harvest Time Seafood plant closed, and turns away fishermen because he can't shell their catch.

"If these guys got to be punished for doing what's right, well in the end the Bible says wrong will be called right and right as wrong," he said. "Guys doing right won't cross that border without papers, and now they can't help feed their families, and neither can I."

The effect: A toppling tower

Sugar mills say they'll shut down. Rice mills and North Louisiana forestry will slow to a crawl. There's a projected \$2.2 billion loss in revenue throughout Louisiana, when multiplier effects are figured in.

The drama starts April 1, when about 75 percent of the normal peeling capacity of Louisiana crawfish processors will be lost, said Adam Johnson, president of the Crawfish Processor Alliance, and owner of Bayouland Seafood, a crawfish and alligator processor in Cecilia.

He'll run at about 40 percent of his capacity from last year after missing out on 25 guest workers he'd normally have. It means Johnson won't process nearly as many crawfish tails, and sell less to restaurants and distributors. He buys less from farmers, who then dump crawfish back in overpopulated ponds, where they'll all be smaller for next year's harvest. The farmers don't buy as much bait, or new traps.

"I hire every American that I can, but nobody wants to quit a full-time job to peel crawfish for a few months, or alligators for few weeks," he said. "We know when we have these guest workers here they're showing up every day. Local workers are showing up one day and not the next. An alligator is a very expensive animal and if I don't process it right away that meat goes to waste."

Some are skilled professionals filling jobs that few locals are trained for.

Eight months before the first cane stalk is cut, Louisiana sugar mills are "extremely concerned" they won't get to hire the veteran sugar boiler operators they always bring from Latin America, said Jim Simon, chair of the American Sugarcane League.

"They monitor the syrup as its being boiled into sugar, it's almost an artform they've been able to acquire over years. ... We're processing (sugar) here when they're in an offseason. So these are kind of journeyman, they move around to different sugar-producing areas," he said. "Without these people, sugar will be a bottleneck. It could slow down our processing, make us much more inefficient - it could be crippling."

Industry needs quick fix

Agriculture Commissioner Mike Strain has met with worried Louisiana business owners, and said he's working with other state ag commissioners to push for change now.

They've sent a letter to secretaries of U.S. Homeland Security, Labor and Agriculture departments detailing the guest worker problem, and are pushing congressional leaders to reinstitute to exemption for experienced guest workers to come to the U.S.

"But we need to ask the President for an executive order to put the exception back in place," Strain said. "We're trying by every method possible, but it feels like we're screaming alone in the wilderness here."