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## Limited visas hurt La. business



**BRYAN TUCK/THE ADVOCATE**

Amy Do picks crabs Tuesday at Harvest Time Seafood in Abbeville. Owner Kevin Dartez said his workers normally would be peeling crawfish, shucking oysters and making crab traps in addition to picking crabs at this time of year, but he doesn't have the labor.

### Immigrant workers in short supply, needed in state

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WASHINGTON – Usually at this time of the year, Kevin Dartez's huge metal shed and cooler would be filled with Mexican immigrant workers shelling crawfish and picking crabmeat with Spanish Christian music playing in the background.

But this year, the tables Dartez uses to process Louisiana seafood are empty, the aprons worn by the workers hang idle because of a political battle in Washington over temporary work visas.

Each year, the federal government issues permission for foreign workers to come into states like Louisiana to toil in seasonal industry jobs spurned by Americans.

The workers contribute to the Social Security system, pay taxes and buoy industries such as rice and sugar mills, construction, shipyards, hotels and restaurants before returning home.

But this year, the federal government has yet to lift an annual 66,000 cap on what are known as H-2B temporary work visas. The cap was reached on the second day of the year and though the federal government last year allowed over 120,000 temporary workers into the country — the most in the nation's history — the current ceiling is not expected to be lifted any time soon because of a conflict over more widespread immigration reform.

That leaves Dartez about 45 workers short for his Abbeville business, Harvest Time Seafood.

"As it stands, I will not get them unless Congress does something," Dartez said.

On Tuesday, U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, began collecting signatures for a resolution that would force a House vote on the matter. The visas, of which three of every four go to Mexicans, are being tied up by an unusual opponent — the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

The caucus is stunting passage of legislation that would lift the cap because it is using the issue as leverage to force Congress to write a more comprehensive immigration bill.

"They're beating us over the head and this is a legal program," said Frank Randol of Randol's Inc., another crawfish and crab processor in Lafayette. "This doesn't make sense, they're holding the country at bay."

A spokesman for the caucus declined to comment on the matter. A bipartisan coalition of 182 Congress members have co-sponsored House or Senate legislation that would allow any worker who had obtained the visas over the last three years to return.

"Sugar cane is not being processed in my district, rice is not being milled," Boustany said. "There are small businesses all around the country that are suffering."

Boustany is unlikely to come up with the 218 signatures needed to force the House leadership to hold a vote on the matter. But he hopes that simply calling for a vote could focus a national spotlight on the situation.

"I need to do everything I can to help small businesses in my district," Boustany said. "I need to do everything I can to bring attention to the issue."

Not allowing the cap to be lifted could cripple Louisiana industries, proponents such as Boustany say. A recent survey of 50 Louisiana businesses that rely on the workers showed that 2,000 immigrant workers affect another 15,000 jobs down the line.

Kelly Couch of New Roads is a former grass sod farmer who has become an expert and business consultant for Louisiana companies applying for the visas.

"If you have a rice farmer, you have to have a rice mill, they go hand in hand," Couch said. "We need help because Louisiana is a big user of the visas."

The state Department of Agriculture has estimated that as many as 30,000 temporary immigrant workers are needed in Louisiana, about one out of every four granted in the nation. The lack of visas could cost Louisiana industries that rely on them \$2.2 billion, Boustany said.

That cost could be passed onto consumers because businesses like Dartez's will rely on importing their products.

"It's going to be really a big deal for everybody," he said. "It's going to have a domino affect."