

Seafood lovers could feel pinch from rules on migrant workers

By KAYLA GAGNET

ABBEVILLE, La. -- A shortage of workers to process and package seafood could soon start to affect the price and availability of what's on area tables this year. And in south Louisiana, where they say the four seasons are crawfish, crab, shrimp and oyster, everyone from fishermen to restaurant owners has cause for concern.

Right now in Acadiana, several seafood processing plants sit empty and dark, with no one to pick crabs, package shrimp or peel crawfish.

That's because the federal government's cap of 66,000 seasonal unskilled workers from foreign countries has been met early this year. And no more workers who come from other countries will be allowed into the United States until next year unless Congress changes the law.

Businesses can bring in the foreign workers only after they've proven there are no domestic workers to take the jobs. They must apply for a special work visa - or H2B - for each worker. In Louisiana alone, businesses applied for a total of 9,980 migrant workers for 2005, according to the state Department of Labor. Most of Louisiana's H2B workers come from Mexico.

"These are low-income, temporary, stinky, yucky, nasty jobs that these people come and do," said Kelly Couch, who helps businesses from around Lafayette, Baton Rouge and Lake Charles file the paperwork to get worker visas. "You can't find people in Louisiana to do that."

It's tough to find people anywhere in the country to do the jobs H2B workers do, which can also include construction, cleaning hotel rooms and working restaurant kitchens. Other states such as Maryland, Rhode Island and New Hampshire have reported staffing headaches because they didn't get migrant workers for the tourism and seafood industries.

No one is sure why the demand for workers has spiked in recent years. Last year was the first time the cap has been met since the special work visa program started 15 years ago.

"As far as we can tell, it's just an increase in demand," said Chris Bentley, spokesman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "We don't know what is driving that demand."

Kevin Dartez, owner of Harvest Time Seafood in Abbeville, said he usually gets 20 workers from Mexico who arrive in late February and pick crabs for 10 months out of the year. Many of the same workers have been coming from the same village for years, Dartez said.

But Dartez didn't get workers this year because the cap was met Jan. 3, just days before his application landed on an immigration office desk.

"Now, the government has me handcuffed," he said.

He tried everything he could think of to get Americans to come work for him; he even knocked on people's doors, but to no avail.

The jobs pay little, but usually more than minimum wage. In many plants like Harvest Time, workers are paid by the pound and can average up to \$7 or \$8 an hour.

At first it seemed Dartez and others had just two options - work illegal immigrants or shut down. He plans to do neither; instead, he's trying to diversify his company by selling ready-made crab cakes, and he's bringing in frozen crab meat from Colombia.

"I hate to bring in stuff from other countries, but when the government ties your hands, what else can you do?" Dartez said.

Using Mexican laborers has become commonplace in the seafood industry, said Jerald Horst, chairman of the Louisiana State Seafood Industry Advisory Board. The jobs are intensive and hands-on, Horst said, and few American workers want them.

"We just ran out of people," Horst said. "It's endemic now in all the processing industries - shrimp, crabs, fish, oysters."

Jim Rich is one of the lucky ones. He got 31 workers for his plant, Catfish Wholesale in Meaux. But he needed 50; that's how many he applies for each year. He doesn't think the shortage will affect his output this year, but he's worried about whether he'll get any workers in the future.

"I could be there next year," Rich said. "I've been bringing in Mexican people for (12) years and never had a problem before."

Crystal Marceaux, bookkeeper for Gulf Crown Seafood in Delcambre, said she's got about another month before her business would be in full swing packaging shrimp. But she didn't get the 60 workers she needs from Mexico, and she's frustrated.

"We just don't know what to do," Marceaux said.

It appears too early to tell what effect the worker shortage will have on consumers. Dartez said he's been in contact with some of the local grocery stores and restaurants where he sells his product, letting them know this year will be different.

Brian Rush, part owner of The Riverfront Restaurant in Abbeville, buys crab meat from Dartez to use in a variety of dishes.

"We use a lot of fresh crabmeat here during crab season. We use a lot of it because it's available, it's a good product, and it's profitable," Rush said. "I'm going to find the product, I'm sure, but it's going to be more work and probably going to be more expensive."