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## Seasonal jobs threatened

### Foreign workers may lose jobs because of possible cap on program

Pamela Brogan  
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON - Thousands of foreign workers at hotels, resorts and small businesses might lose their jobs unless Congress renews a federal law that exempts them from a cap on the number of visas for seasonal workers.

The exemption expired Sept. 30.

The issue is creating not only angst for the workers but for employers as well. The workers might not be able to return to the United States next year if Congress doesn't act. Employers say they need the foreign workers for seasonal jobs that Americans don't want.

Bipartisan proposals in Congress would allow seasonal foreign workers who return annually to the United States, under the H2B guest worker program, to be exempt from a national cap that limits the number of visas for such workers to 66,000. The House bill would permanently exempt seasonal workers from the cap; the Senate bill extends the exemption from the cap for five years.

But the bills are stalled in Congress, caught up in the national debate over immigration and guest worker programs.

Four members of the Villarauz-Hernandez family from Mexico and their employer, Lee Thomas, general manager of the Grand Oaks Hotel in Branson, Mo., are affected by the impasse.

"I don't want to go back to Veracruz, but I (might) have to," said Roberto Villarauz, 33, who works at the hotel as a janitor for \$7.75 per hour.

In May, he arrived with his wife, Mayra Hernandez, and cousin Alonso Villarauz and Alonso's wife Cristel Hernandez. All earn \$7.75 per hour at the Grand Oaks as janitors or housekeepers. In Mexico, janitors earn \$9 per day, Alonso said. The family will return to Mexico on Dec. 15 when their visa expires.

Alonso said he is a "good worker" and hopes the law will be extended so that he can return next year.

Last year, there were 97,279 seasonal H2B workers including 36,792 returning workers, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Employers must pay the workers competitive wages and file immigration and labor forms with the state and federal departments of labor, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security.

There is more demand for the workers than the number of allowable visas. On Oct. 1, the first day of the 2008 fiscal year, the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Service announced that the H2B visa cap, - 33,000- had been reached for the first six months of the fiscal year. Employers can apply for the visas up to four months before the workers are hired. Foreign workers who start their jobs on or after Oct. 1 will be subject to the national caps unless Congress extends the exemption, the service said.