



Delmarva 47 News

Visa Problems Could Thin Out Crab Industry

By KEIRA BENSON

(MARYLAND -- WMDT) 2/9/2009

Photographer: Michelle Bambarly

The upcoming crab season has the potential to be a nightmare for Dorchester County processing plants.

"It's going to be pretty devastating without our workers coming in here," said Jack Brooks of J.M. Clayton Company.

Normally, Congress will allow sixty-six thousand foreign workers to come into the United States on H2B visas. This year, the visas were tapped out before many seafood processors were even allowed to apply. Now, Brooks only has about five local workers to pick his crabs when normally he has about seventy.

"Picking crabs is the engine. If you remove this, it's broken," said Brooks.

Senator Barbara Mikulski has introduced legislation that would allow returning H2B workers to come without counting towards that cap. If it doesn't pass, Brooks says he'll have to close this year. His customers who've heard about the worker shortage are already looking for imported crab. He's not sure if he would ever get them back.

"I can envision them saying, 'Hey, I'm using this other stuff now. It's cheaper and you're not reliable anymore. I've got to have a reliable source.' That's what I would do if I were a buyer," said Brooks.

Senator Ben Cardin and Congressman Frank Kratovil are urging the Department of Labor and the Department of Homeland Security to do whatever they can to prevent worker shortages.

They say the problem needs to be resolved quickly.