

25,000 visas for seasonal workers available

BY GREG LATSHAW • STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 7, 2009

SALISBURY -- Eastern Shore crab picking plants, hampered by a shortage of foreign laborers this summer, found out Thursday they will get another shot at hiring them.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced it will release another 25,000 H-2B work visas. It will enable local companies to hire many seasonal workers from Mexico and keep their production lines -- currently under capacity -- busy.

"It's just in the nick of time. The fall is one of our busiest times," said Bill Brooks, a partner in the family-owned J.M. Clayton Seafood Co. in Cambridge.

Brooks estimated his plant has operated at only 40 percent its capacity due to the worker shortage. He said many other plants in the region haven't opened at all due to the shortfall of foreign help.

Rep. Frank M. Kratovil, whose district includes the Eastern Shore, believes the companies will get the crab picking workers within two weeks. He said it only makes sense the government help businesses that are trying to hire immigrant workers legally to do a job many Americans aren't willing to do.

"We need to be rewarding people who play by the rules," Kratovil said.

In April, the Dorchester County Seafood Association hosted a job fair in an effort to hire 300 local employees. The effort was "largely unsuccessful," Brooks said.

Noreen L. Eberly, director of the Maryland Seafood and Aquaculture division in the state Department of Agriculture, said the extra workers will have plenty of work waiting for them.

"August through the end of November, they really go all out," Eberly said.

U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md., released a statement calling the additional visas "good news for Maryland's watermen, Maryland's crab industry and Maryland's economy."

For several years, Maryland seafood plants have struggled to get foreign workers on H-2B visas. The federal government had authorized 66,000 visas each year, under the condition that returning workers did not count against the cap. But several years ago, that condition expired, which has caused a shortage of visas ever since.

Eastern Shore crab-picking houses, which compete against businesses in other industries across the USA, say they are at a disadvantage in obtaining the visas. That's because they must wait to apply until others have already had the chance; at this point, the visas are often awarded elsewhere.

The U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services Department explained why the extra 25,000 visas were released in a prepared statement.

"The Department of State reports it unexpectedly received far fewer requests for H-2B visas and, as a result, has issued only 40,640 H-2B visas in fiscal year 2009 to date. This means that there are approximately 25,000 visas that may go unused," the release states.

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