

Crab houses look to inmates amid shortage of pickers

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With the foreign workers who have long done the dirty work in Maryland's seafood industry held up by red tape, desperate owners of the Eastern Shore's processing plants are investigating a new source of crab pickers: state prisoners.

Members of the [Chesapeake Bay](#) Seafood Industries Association this week toured facilities -- the women's prison in Jessup and the prerelease unit for women in Baltimore -- to see if there is a way to have inmates do the low-paying work, potentially saving one of the state's signature industries.

A few weeks ago, corrections officials toured a pair of crab houses on Hoopers Island in [Dorchester County](#), where the majority of the state's crab is processed for supermarkets and restaurants.

Logistics could stand in the way. Transporting prisoners 2 1/2 hours each way every day seems too difficult, and quality-control issues could arise if crabs are shipped to Central Maryland to be picked. There also are sanitation

But Maryland law would allow it; inmates already do jobs that include making furniture and butchering meat in the state's prisons.

"Picking crabs is not rocket science," said [Jack Brooks](#), who owns the J.M. Clayton Co. processing facility in Cambridge. Experience helps though, he said. "The quality has to be perfect -- no shell."

Still, he said, the industry needs to "look at all the options and turn over every rock. The crab season's here, and the Congress has not acted and the places can't open."

Corrections officials - who approached the processors with the idea -- say the discussions are "very preliminary."

"If any inmate labor would ultimately be involved in crab picking, formal regulations and rules would have to be developed, health guidelines observed and significant logistical hurdles surmounted," said prison system spokesman Mark Vernarelli.

At issue is finding workers willing to spend their days picking the meat from pile after pile of steamed crabs so the product can be packaged for sale in little plastic tubs.

Local women did the work for decades. But changing times meant women had opportunities for employment beyond the crab house. Few men have sought the jobs.

For more than a decade, the processors have relied on workers from Mexico who travel to the Eastern Shore for six months or so to pick crabs, entering the country on H2B visas issued to foreign workers in a variety of seasonal industries. At the end of the season, they go home.

But with growing demand nationwide for such temporary workers, only one of Maryland's 21 seafood processing operations was able to get visas to bring the foreigners into the country this year.

In the past, the state's congressional delegation has been able to secure special provisions to get the workers to Maryland. Those efforts have failed this year.

Some critics of H2B say the foreigners depress wages for local workers, while others argue the temporary visas make it more difficult to focus attention on the need for broad immigration reform.

Beyond looking into prison labor, the Dorchester County Seafood Packers Association for the first time is sponsoring

a job fair on Hoopers Island on Thursday, seeking more than 300 locals to pick crabs. The processors believe that people who have worked in small-parts assembly or in sewing would be especially skilled at separating crab from its shell.

The jobs start at \$6.71 an hour but can go as high as \$10 an hour for those who are quick with their hands, association officials say. If prisoners did the work, they would have to be paid the prevailing wage, Vernarelli said.

Industry officials say they aren't expecting many local residents to seek the jobs, despite the down economy and rising unemployment.

"The younger generation doesn't want to do a seasonal job, a not-glamorous job," said Bill Sieling, executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association. "It's not the kind of jobs people go out and clamor for."

Processors say they need workers from somewhere or they won't be able to open. And the processors are a vital link in an economic chain.

While many crabs are sold whole by the bushel to consumers, even more are sold to processing houses. If there are no workers to process the crabs, not just crab houses but watermen could be out of business.

"The industry is at the end of the tether," Sieling said. "The job fair is one last-ditch effort. Maybe we'll be pleasantly surprised."