

Crab-picking houses get a reprieve

Federal government allows more foreign workers

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08/07/09

They're planning a party on Hoopers Island.

After months of going without temporary foreign workers, seafood processors on the rural Eastern Shore got the OK yesterday to apply to "import" crab pickers into Maryland.

Most of the state's crab-picking houses have been shuttered or running under capacity all summer, as they've only been able to use local workers. A federal visa program to bring foreign workers to the states for seasonal jobs was filled up before the picking houses were able to apply.

But the Department of Homeland Security announced yesterday that about 25,000 of the 66,000 visas in the program, called H2B, had not, in fact, been snatched up, as had earlier been thought.

"This is literally a lifesaver for us down here," said Jack Brooks of the J.M. Clayton Co. in Cambridge, who also head the

Dorchester Seafood Packers Association. "We have had about one-third of the businesses here who have been working at 10 (percent) to 20 percent capacity. About one-third have been working at 40 percent and about one-third literally that have not opened, that have not been able to pick a crab."

But phones were buzzing and paperwork was being shuffled in Cambridge, Hoopers Island and other crab-reliant communities on the Eastern Shore yesterday as word came that the "girls" who pick crabs would be able to come after all.

Brooks was putting together paperwork to send to the government by Federal Express and notifying his customers that fresh, local crabmeat would soon be available.

"Hopefully it will enable us to salvage our season," said Brooks.

Jay Newcomb, manager of the A.E. Phillips & Son plant on Hoopers Island, found out about the additional visas in a late-night phone call from Rep. Frank Kratovil on Wednesday.

"There's a lot of relief. When the workers come, there will be more relief," said Newcomb, who also owns Old Salty's restaurant on Hoopers Island, where tentative plans are being made for an H2B-themed celebration.

The A.E. Phillips & Son plant was one of the shuttered Eastern Shore crab-picking plants. If all goes well, Newcomb said he hopes to get his workers in place around Labor Day weekend, just in time for the busy fall season.

In the fall, the "basket trade" of live crabs being sold to markets and restaurants drops off. At the same time, female crabs make a southward migration right past the lower Eastern Shore. So watermen have lots of crabs and rely on selling them - especially females - to the picking houses.

Newcomb said he heard happy watermen spreading the news over marine radio yesterday morning.

"They're all talking about it," he said. "There's more spirit in their voice."

But even as the picking houses open their doors or get up to full speed, they still might end the year in the red, Newcomb said.

"We won't lose as much," Newcomb said of his plant.

Visa program perils

The struggle with the H2B visa program has been an on-and-off problem for the picking houses, where fluffy white meat is pried from blue crabs for use in soups, dips and crab cakes.

The picking houses have had a hard time finding locals willing to do the difficult, low-paying work. The few American pickers left are mostly elderly women, and those from younger generations aren't taking their place.

The picking houses turned to the legal, temporary, foreign workers as a labor solution in the 1990s. But some years, the H2B visas - which are currently capped at 66,000 - are snapped up by other seasonal industries before the picking houses have been allowed to apply.

Year-to-year patches have kept the picking houses open most years.

Kratovil, D-Stevensville, said he's hoping for a more permanent solution. He laments that businesses "who are doing the right thing" have been caught up in the intense national debate over immigration reform.

"If we don't fix the underlying problem, we'll find ourselves in the same spot," he said.

Kratovil has been working on both legislative angles and administrative angles to fix the program. He's pleased that the Department of Homeland Security agreed to the additional slots this year.

U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md., who also has been working on the H2B visas, welcomed the news.

"Today's announcement is good news for Maryland's watermen, Maryland's crab industry and Maryland's economy," she said in a statement yesterday.