

Guest workers will be missed

Dorchester seafood packers may languish without H2Bs

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Few year-round Dorchester residents pick crabs for a living these days, and most of those who still do are senior citizens. In response to concerns about immigrants and temporary guest workers taking jobs away from Americans, Congress in recent years limited the number of H2B guest worker visas available for this sort of seasonal work. This year, of the 66,000 available H2B visas, none were issued to Mexicans and other Central America residents who have come in past years to Dorchester County to pick crabs.

Rep. Frank Kratovil has responded to concerns among constituents by co-sponsoring a bill in the House of Representatives that would allow any H2B worker who came to the United States during at least one of the past three years to automatically qualify for future visas, making permanent a temporary extension that was not granted this year.

Sen. Barbara Mikulski, who has for years championed this cause, proposed a similar bill in the Senate.

Could the law of unintended consequences be at work here?

A few years ago a big push was mounted to stop guest workers from taking jobs away from Americans. The argument then was that without these guest workers, businesses would close because no one would take those temporary, low-paying seasonal jobs. Not so, the guest-worker opponents declared.

If seafood packing houses do not open this year because of a lack of seasonal workers, will that settle the question?

Kratovil recently asked a group of watermen and Dorchester County residents how the loss of H2B workers will affect their lives and livelihoods. Responses included concerns about the businesses closing, but other points raised included research indicating every H2B worker creates 2 1/2 jobs for Shore residents; area bankers mentioned that the work done by temporary guest workers supports the livelihoods of watermen who hold mortgages and take out other loans, and that the H2B workers are often bank customers themselves. And without H2B workers to pick and pack crabmeat, sale of crabs could drop, by as much as 90 percent -- the percentage of crabmeat that is sold already picked and packaged.

These points were raised by Dorchester County residents, not politicians or bureaucrats.

While it seemed logical to assume the presence of guest workers would steal jobs away from unemployed Americans, we may soon find out this was a false assumption.