



Maryland Crab Picker Job Fair Falls Flat; Companies Turn to Congress for Help

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HOOPER'S ISLAND, Md. - Maryland crabbers are looking forward to getting back to work this season, but several crab houses on Hooper's Island don't have enough workers to pick the crab meat and it could force some of the businesses to shut down for the year.

Usually the crab companies hire H2B workers, or immigrants, who come to work for the season. But for the first time, the Maryland crabbers were denied the immigrants. So they held a job fair with the goal of recruiting about 300 workers, but only 15 people showed up.

"So we excited because this today is open for the jobs around here," said job applicant Maria Lugo.

The seven crab companies at the crab picking job fair are all relying on workers to keep their business afloat on Hooper's Island.

"It's our livelihood here in Dorchester County. That's what it's made for, the watermen and farmers. We have the highest unemployment in Maryland, here in Dorchester County. So we were hoping to get some workers out of it," said Jay Newcomb, A.E. Phillips Crab Co. Manager.

But, only 15 people applied. Newcomb and his business was the first crab company on the island to hire H2B workers in 1990. But since then, more and more companies have been applying for the seasonal workers and each year, only 66,000 are allowed into the U.S. to work.

"You can only apply 120 days before your need, so this spring they were all used up. We've been approved for our visas through Homeland Security, as far as workers, but the actual visa, there's a cap, so we could not get them," said Newcomb.

A typical crab house needs about 25 crab pickers to work, but with only about 15 applicants at the job fair, that only averages about two crab pickers per house.

One crab company operator is asking the federal government to give the Maryland crabbers some help, or else the \$22 million industry in could be washed up.

"We're sitting here thing what else do we need to do. We're not sitting on our hands asking Capitol Hill for help, but we really do need some help from over there to help keep this thing going. No question," said Jack Brooks, J.M. Clayton Company.

Despite all of the advertisements and publicity of the job fair, the watermen fear their crabbing days may be numbered. "The

season has started and we've been begging and pleading all winter and spring and now we're to the day of shutting down now if we don't get our workers," said Newcomb.

There are currently three bills in Congress right now to try to help bring some more workers to the Maryland crabbing industry. However, a crab company owner said even if Congress did something immediately, it would take about a month and a half for the companies to legally get their workers, which would be well into the crabbing season.