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Md. crab houses look to inmates to help pick

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Owners of seafood processing plants on Maryland's Eastern Shore are considering hiring state prisoners to pick crabs because the foreign workers they've depended on for years have recently had trouble getting temporary visas.

The industry needs to explore all options, said Jack Brooks, who owns the J.M. Clayton Co. processing facility in Cambridge.

"The crab season's here, and the Congress has not acted and the places can't open," Brooks said.

Corrections officials approached processors with the idea of using inmates to pick crabs, but they say the discussions are "very preliminary." Picking crabs involves pulling the meat from its shell.

Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association members toured the women's prison in Jessup and the prerelease unit for women in Baltimore this week, and corrections officials toured two Dorchester County crab houses a few weeks ago.

"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," prison system spokesman Mark Vernarelli said.

Maryland law would allow it - inmates already make furniture and butcher meat in the state's prisons - but there are still logistical concerns. Transporting prisoners 2 1/2 hours each way every day would be difficult. Shipping crabs to Central Maryland to be picked also raises quality-control issues.

"Picking crabs is not [rocket science](#)," Brooks said, but experience helps. "The quality has to be perfect - no shell."

Local women did the work for decades, but they now have other work opportunities and few men have sought the jobs.

For the last decade, processors have relied on Mexican workers who travel to the Eastern Shore for about six months to pick crabs, then go home.

Those workers entered the United States on seasonal H2B visas, but there has been a growing demand for temporary workers elsewhere.

Meanwhile, some in the industry are looking to locals, but they aren't expecting many applicants despite the down economy.

The Dorchester County Seafood Packers Association is sponsoring a job fair on Hoopers Island on Thursday. They're looking for more than 300 people and think people who have worked in small-parts assembly or in sewing would be especially skilled at separating crab from its shell.

"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."