

OPINION

Our Say: Visa system a threat to seafood industry

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A venerable Maryland industry got a reprieve this week from the federal government.

We're grateful that the Department of Homeland Security decided to release an additional 25,000 H2B visas, allowing Eastern Shore crab-picking houses to have enough workers on hand for the fall rush. And we give credit to area legislators - particularly U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski and the Eastern Shore's congressman, Rep. Frank Kratovil - for pushing the federal government to make this decision.

But this doesn't change the fact that Maryland's crab industry - among others - is at the mercy of an outdated system that imposes an arbitrary quota. Congress should fix that system.

Crab-picking was once done by local residents. But times changed, education improved and the Eastern Shore's economy diversified. Unable to attract enough local workers, the picking houses started relying on foreign ones - mainly from Mexico - brought in under the H2B program.

But the number of H2B visas has been arbitrarily capped at 66,000 for nearly 20 years, and employers aren't allowed to file requests more than 120 days before workers are needed. That means, in practice, that the Eastern Shore seafood houses are sometimes squeezed out by other seasonal industries - as happened this year.

At a minimum, the seafood houses should be permanently exempted from the quota. But actually the whole H2B visa program - with its clumsy rules and minimal and arbitrary quota - should be overhauled. Given the amount of initiative Congress has shown on immigration issues, we're not holding our breath waiting for that one.