



Seafood Packers Starved for Workers Despite Economic Downturn

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By MEGAN MILLER

FISHING CREEK (April 16, 2008) - At least eight seafood packing companies on Maryland's Eastern Shore are operating shorthanded or not at all due to employee shortages. The Dorchester Seafood Packers Association cites federal restrictions on temporary worker visas as the problem. A first-ever job fair held today only drew approximately a dozen potential workers for the seasonal, near-minimum wage jobs.

Members of the association gathered at Old Salty's Restaurant on Hooper's Island Thursday morning to talk solutions with Rep. Frank Kratovil, D-Stevensville.

"I'm afraid if we close up, even for one year, we'll lose a lot of the hold that we have on our crabmeat market," said Virgil Ruark Jr., president of Charles H. Parks & Co. Seafood Packers. "Folks will have to find crabmeat elsewhere, and once they go elsewhere they might not come back."

Among Maryland seafood packers, the greatest need is for crab pickers -- workers who use special knives to quickly but carefully separate shell from flesh without damaging select pieces of crabmeat. Historically, the job was performed by the wives and children of watermen. In recent years most crab pickers have been foreign workers, usually women, in the U.S. on H-2B temporary worker visas.

Those visas are capped at 66,000 per year. Since 2004, the cap has been offset by an exemption that allows seasonal employees from previous years to return without being included in the annual limit. That exemption expired on Sept. 27, 2007, leaving many dependent industries to founder.

Kratovil said resistance from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus has been a major obstacle on the path to a solution to the H-2B problem.

"They view it as a bargaining chip related to immigration reform," Kratovil said. "But their bargaining chip is jobs in my district."

But caucus spokesman Miguel Ayala said the group simply wants to see all immigration issues addressed at one time.

"The caucus as a whole supports the (temporary worker visa) program, or rather has nothing against the program, but at this point the CHC doesn't want to see any immigration legislation done in a piecemeal fashion," Ayala said.

"After meeting with the president on March 18, I think our members are very hopeful and looking forward to moving forward on immigration reform this year."

That might be too late to help industries like the seafood packers, already facing a costly late start to the season. Likewise, a Feb. 5 bill extending the H-2B exemption provision for three years, introduced by Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., is held up in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Meanwhile, the seasonal worker shortage hurts not only seafood packers, but the region's related industries, including materials suppliers, shipping companies and watermen.

"What most people don't understand is that we're so far away from the retail market, which is in Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, that our crabbers rely on the picking houses to sell the crabs," said Dorchester Seafood Harvesters Association President Ben Parks. "Without the pickers to pick these crabs, our watermen don't have a market for them."

"Hopefully Mikulski and Cardin and Kratovil, all those guys can pull a rabbit out of the hat," he added. "That's the only hope that we've got."

At Old Salty's, Ruark and representatives from six other packing companies -- about one-third of such businesses still operating in the state -- set up tables for an advertised job fair, hoping to snag enough local hires to get their businesses running. By late afternoon, only about a dozen potential workers showed up.

It was the first time the packing companies tried holding a job fair, said Jay Newcomb, general manager of A. E. Phillips & Son and Dorchester County council president. They had hoped for a better turnout.

"They held a job fair over in Ocean City and got several hundred people," Newcomb said. "We thought, well, let's try anything."

A Baltimore Sun article^[1] Wednesday cites the association saying, "The jobs start at \$6.71 an hour but can go as high as \$10 an hour for those who are quick with their hands." The minimum wage in Maryland is \$6.55 an hour.

David Noss contributed to this story.

1. Stephanie Desmon, "Crab houses look to inmates amid shortage of pickers," *Baltimore Sun*, April 15, 2009.