



Seafood processors scramble for visas

Finding of 25,000 unused work permits comes as 'great news'

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Maryland seafood processors, desperately short of hands to pick crabmeat, are rushing to apply for visas for foreign workers after the federal Department of Homeland Security declared Thursday that 25,000 seasonal immigration permits have gone unclaimed for this year.

The unexpected discovery that some of the annual allocation of 66,000 seasonal worker visas were still available was a welcome relief for the operators of Eastern Shore crab "picking houses," some of which had remained shuttered when the season started in the spring because they could not find enough help.

Even in a region with nearly double-digit unemployment, the crab companies remain reliant on migrant labor from abroad because so few local residents are willing to take the messy, repetitive jobs. Recent employment drives have been unsuccessful, leaving employers to wait for federal relief.

"This is great news, just huge," said Jack Brooks, president of the Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association, and co-owner of J.M. Clayton Co., a Cambridge picking house that has been operating with less than half its normal staff. He and others say the federal announcement came in the nick of time to save the state's seafood industry from the brink of economic calamity.

"If something didn't happen in the next couple weeks, they were in huge trouble," said Douglas W. Lipton, an economist at the University of Maryland. "We could easily have gone from 22 firms to 10 or 12."

As it is, about a third of the state's seafood processing businesses have remained closed this year, Brooks said, because they were unable to get visas to bring in the roughly 400 foreign workers needed to pick the meat from crabs being harvested by the bushel-load now from the Chesapeake Bay.

The rest, like Clayton, have limped along with partial staffs, able to process only a fraction of their normal output. Brooks said his business has 30 of the 60 or 65 workers it usually hires, including some locals and some foreign workers whose visas were transferred from another company. But A.E. Phillips & Son Inc. in Fishing Creek has not opened yet. Jay Newcomb, the firm's general manager and president of the Dorchester County Council, said Phillips usually hires about 35 foreign workers from March or April through December. So far, the business has only processed about four bushels of crabs as a demonstration for visiting tourists, he said.

Newcomb said he hoped his visa application could be processed quickly so workers would arrive by Labor Day, as crabmeat-picking intensifies from then until it peaks in October.

The impact of the worker shortage extends beyond the crab-picking houses. Watermen rely on selling their crab catch to the processors in the fall, and Newcomb noted that many already were having trouble making house and boat payments.

Without more workers to process crabmeat, said Lipton, "I don't know what those fall crabbers would do. They're already facing a shorter season and limits on catching females." Lipton has estimated that every seasonal worker picking crabmeat supports 2.5 other jobs in the regional economy.

The H-2B seasonal worker visas have been a lifeline for the bay's seafood industry, which has suffered from a chronic shortage of local people willing to take jobs picking crabmeat for sale in cans. Dorchester County, home to several of the seafood businesses, has the highest unemployment rate in the state - 11 percent - but picking crabmeat is painstaking, with long hours and low pay, and it's only seasonal. Newcomb said his workers are paid \$7.25 an hour, or \$2 per half-pound, and that experienced pickers can earn as much as \$10 an hour.

Raising wages is not an option, though, officials say, because local crabmeat is already competing with cheaper crabmeat imported from Asia and South America.

Brooks said Clayton had retained a labor recruiter this year, who canvassed Maryland and neighboring states for prospects. She interviewed 34 job applicants, he said, but made only a single hire.

Congress makes 66,000 H-2B visas available every year, but demand nationwide for landscapers, farmworkers and other seasonal employees outstrips the supply. Federal rules put Maryland's seafood processing businesses near the end of the line in applying for the visas. In previous years, Democratic Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski pushed through legislation that helped the seafood businesses by exempting returning foreign workers from the visa cap.

But her efforts were thwarted last year and this amid gridlock in Congress over immigration. So Mikulski and Rep. Frank M. Kratovil Jr., an Eastern Shore Democrat, had pressed the Obama administration for administrative relief. The discovery that the seasonal-worker visas had not all been distributed was "unprecedented," said Homeland Security spokeswoman Chris Ratigan, who was at a loss to explain it.

"I'm so pleased they found 20,000 of these special visas and people in Maryland who followed the rules and returned to Mexico will be able to help us this season and save our industry," Mikulski said yesterday.

But an aide to Kratovil noted that the visa process needs to be revised to avoid a repeat of this year's crisis. The state's seafood industry was only spared, he noted, by the discovery of what he called a "bureaucratic error."

"It's a short-term solution to a long-term problem," said the Kratovil spokesman.

Baltimore Sun reporters Paul West and Jacques Kelly contributed to this article.

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