



## Wanted: crab pickers

Our view: Seafood industry needs guest workers to keep other jobs, too

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Maryland's blue crab season opened officially this month with some skittering apprehensions. Not only are [Chesapeake Bay](#) hard crabs expected to be in short supply but consumer demand for such a premium product may prove soft given the country's economic realities.

But those concerns will be a trifle for the local seafood industry if Congress fails to extend the guest worker program for another season. Most of the state's 22 crab processing plants depend on roughly 600 foreign workers to pick crabs. Without these seasonal workers, many will close, and the economic consequences of that for the rural communities where the plants are located (the majority are in the Eastern Shore's [Dorchester County](#)) will be disastrous.

For the past five years, Congress has recognized this hardship and come to the rescue at the request of U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski. The U.S. has permitted a limited number of guest workers from past years to return to certain industries, Maryland crab processing included.

[Senator Mikulski](#) is pushing for the extension again this year, but there's not much time. Chesapeake Bay crabs are running slower than usual because of the relatively cool spring. Industry observers say that gives Washington a few more weeks to act, but after that, the processors may lose buyers and markets for the year.

Without the plants, watermen will have a hard time selling their catch, particularly the less-desirable crabs, those that are smaller or female. And that loss of income will be felt all around the bay. One study found that each guest worker under the H-2B visa program creates about 2.5 jobs for U.S. citizens. Losing that means a \$20 million blow to Dorchester County alone.

Much of the opposition to the program comes from those who favor immigration reform. They labor under the false belief that accommodating the crab industry merely gives Congress less incentive to tackle such a thorny issue. But Eastern Shore communities are already suffering under the economic recession and don't deserve to have jobs held hostage by immigration politics.

At minimum, the processors merit another one-year extension, as the Eastern Shore's Rep. Frank M. Kratovil Jr. recently proposed. If the [Democrats](#) want to hold onto the 1st District House seat they acquired only last November, they'd be wise to endorse Mr. Kratovil's proposal and let his district keep the H-2B visas, not merely for the sake of the guest workers but for local full-time residents as well.