



Without enough pickers, crab processing may be delayed

By GAIL DEAN Dorchester Editor

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FISHING CREEK When crab season opens here April 1, Hooper's Island's nine crab processing plants likely will remain closed for lack of workers to pick the crabs. The story will be the same at Dorchester's four other crab processing plants two in Wingate and two in Cambridge which account for the bulk of Maryland's 15 crab processing plants.

The crab pickers won't be here because they have been unable to obtain H2B temporary visas this year, a situation watermen throughout the Chesapeake Bay region want Congressman Frank Kratovil, D-1st-Md., to remedy.

Friday, watermen from Bozman to Smith Island gathered here at the A.E. Phillips packing plant to meet with Kratovil. About 150 watermen and representatives from a variety of other businesses, including three Cambridge bankers, met with Kratovil in the section of the processing plant where crab pickers, primarily from Mexico, would be working were it not for federal red tape preventing their return.

Stainless steel tables were set with piles of steamed crabs (from Virginia, where the season opened March 18), stacks of plastic containers, paper towels and knives a silent testimony to the job that needs to be done and the people currently unable to come here and do it.

Each year for more than a decade, people from Mexico and Central America have come to the Eastern Shore to work in crab processing plants. A few Dorchester residents, now nearly all senior citizens, have continued to pick crabs for a living. But young people from the community find work elsewhere, in part because they were not allowed into the picking houses as children, which is how previous generations learned this work, because now Maryland law requires crab pickers, who work with sharp knives, to be at least 16 (for which a special permit is required) or 18 without parental permission.

Initially, there were enough of the temporary worker visas for all not just for crab picking but also for landscaping, construction and other seasonal businesses.

But as the nation grew more concerned about immigrants taking American jobs, Congress began limiting the number of H2B visas and creating other obstacles for businesses that have come to rely on the temporary workers.

This year, the H2B program was capped at 66,000 temporary visas, none of which went to the people who had been working in Dorchester's crab processing plants.

Friday Kratovil spoke about congressional legislation proposed to allow the crab pickers and other seasonal workers to return to the United States this year.

He is among the original co-sponsors of House of Representatives Bill 1136, for which Congressman Bart Stupak, D-1st-Mich. is the chief sponsor. Called the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act of 2009, the legislation is designed to allow any H2B temporary worker who has come to the United States during at least one of the past three years to continue to qualify for another temporary visa.

As proposed, Kratovil said, the law would provide for a permanent extension of the H2B program which has, in recent years, been held up until new legislation was passed for its continuance.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., has proposed similar legislation in the U.S. Senate SB 388, Kratovil said, but with only a five-year lifespan.

Kratovil has been working with his fellow congressman to increase support for HR 1136. Friday he said all but one member of Maryland's congressional delegation supports the proposal. The one objection comes from Congresswoman Donna Edwards, D-4th-Md., of Prince George's County.

The biggest problem for the bill is that, Kratovil said, "Somehow this has been thrown in the entire immigration reform issue.

Concerns from labor representatives and Hispanic representatives who feel Mexicans are being exploited by the system are among the obstacles facing the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act of 2009.

Kratovil said he has spoken to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and tempered many of their concerns.

He said another bill has been filed to address the H2-B issue, "put in by the folks who have been reluctant to deal with the issue," which he sees as a good sign that some in Congress who opposed temporary worker visas in the past now see the need for this program.

Instead of extending the existing program, Kratovil said this other bill, "which I haven't seen yet," set limits on industries that can use H2-B, with construction and logging among those that would no longer be able to use temporary worker labor.

"I'm not Superman," Kratovil said Friday, during a more formal gathering which followed at Old Salty's Restaurant, explaining the limited powers of a freshman congressman. But he concluded his remarks by stating, "I guarantee you, I will be fighting to get this resolved as soon as we can."

At Old Salty's he asked those in attendance to explain how the loss of H2-B workers will affect their livelihoods, information he can use on Capitol Hill in his efforts to increase support for HR 1136.

Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association President Jack Brooks told of University of Maryland Sea Grant research which found that every H2-B temporary worker creates 2.5 jobs for Shore residents.

Bank of the Eastern Shore President Sonny Robbins, Gary Pinder of BB&T's Cambridge branch and Bill Marshall of the Bank of the Eastern Shore each spoke of loans and mortgages held by watermen and said the temporary workers are also customers of their banks.

Without the H2-B workers, Marshall said, combined with increased harvest restrictions by the state, "We're on the verge of a collapse here."

Larry Powelly of the Dorchester Seafood Harvesters Association also described the H2-B situation as the possible final straw that could end the careers of many watermen. If the temporary workers don't come to Dorchester this season, he said, "We are all going to take another devastating blow and I don't know if we can handle it."

Seafood buyer P.T. Hambleton of Bozman said watermen throughout the region will have no place to sell their crabs if the packing houses close in Dorchester. "These plants are very important to all of us."

Watermen from Smith Island also made the trip to Fishing Creek Friday. Mark Kitching of the Tangier Sound Watermen's Association said about 50 crabbers on Smith Island sell to two Dorchester processing plants on Hooper's Island which sent boats to the nearby island each day to buy crabs at the dock.

Crabs caught by Crisfield watermen also go to Dorchester processors, according to Jerry Lankford, who operates Southern Connection Seafood in the town that calls itself the Shore's crab capital.

Lankford said there is only one crab picking house left in Crisfield and suggested the harvests of about 120 boats from Crisfield are picked in Dorchester, which could mean a \$3 million loss this year if there are no H2-B workers "and that's just to the crabbers themselves."

Other businessmen spoke of the losses that would occur within related industries.

Russell Gesuero of Victory Packaging in Federalsburg estimates he will lose \$2 million in sales this summer without H2-B workers on Hooper's Island.

Frank King of the Island Pride Grocery in Fishing Creek said he will have to fire employees this summer if there are no H2-B workers.

Joe Brooks of J.M. Clayton's crab processing plant in Cambridge explained that H2-B workers pay income tax, Social Security and Medicare insurance like every other worker in America, even though they will not benefit from Social Security and Medicare programs.

During an interview before Kratovil arrived, Brooks explained that speed is of the essence in dealing with the H2-B program. If HR 1136 and SB 388 were both approved in their respective houses, Brooks said time is needed to create on law from the two pieces of legislation. And then crab packers would still need to go through the process of bringing their H2-B workers to the U.S.

He said it could be several weeks, at best, before the temporary workers could be on the job.

Brooks also explained that picked meat accounts for most of what packing houses sell, estimating 10 percent or less of crabs caught in the Chesapeake Bay are sold as basket crabs.

Brooks said that around 90 percent of the crabs caught by watermen end up picked as crab meat. Which means that when crab season opens April 1, without H2-B workers, most crab packing plants will have no need for most of what is caught.