

Law could cause ski labor headaches

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MONTPELIER, Vt. - A change in federal law could make it harder for northern New England's ski industry to find enough workers this season, officials said.

Parker Riehle, the president of the Vermont Ski Areas Association, said he was still hopeful Congress would change the law to allow foreign workers who came to the United States over the last three years to return for another season without being counted against an annual cap on such workers.

Riehle said Vermont's 18 ski resorts rely on the H-2B program for about 10 to 15 percent of its workers. At its winter peak, the ski areas employ about 22,000 people.

In fiscal 2006, the U.S. admitted a total of 122,511 foreign workers under the H-2B program. Of the total 50,854 were returning workers, said Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration services.

"Potentially you are looking at a loss of 50,000 workers," Saucier said.

Half of the workers admitted under the H-2B program are for winter employment and half are for summer employment. Saucier could not say how many of the returning workers were winter or summer workers.

Nationwide, about 5 percent of the ski industry's workers are hired through the H-2B program, said Geraldine Link, the director of public policy at the Colorado-based National Ski Areas Association.

In Maine, there are about 4,000 full-time equivalent jobs in the ski industry, according to the Ski Maine Association. But Maine resorts don't rely on foreign workers anywhere close to what Vermont does, in part because the state gets about a quarter of the number of skiers each year.

Sunday River ski resort in Newry, the biggest ski resort in Maine, has about 20 foreign workers for the season, from the United Kingdom. But the resort hasn't had any visa problems this year, said Sunday River spokesman Alex Kaufman.