

New England lawmakers push Congress for more seasonal visas

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WASHINGTON --New England's congressional delegation is pushing Congress to approve more seasonal visas for immigrants willing to work at resorts and on farms.

Supporters say their bill, filed last week, would require that businesses prove they cannot find Americans to take the jobs before bringing in seasonal workers.

But anti-immigration activists say seasonal visas hurt American workers by keeping wages low.

Seasonal visas "contribute to the further deterioration of wages and working conditions for American workers," Paul Egan, of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates reducing all forms of immigration, told the Boston Globe.

Supporters disagree.

"Most Americans would prefer year-round employment," said Jane Nichols Bishop, who recruits seasonal workers for businesses on Cape Cod and the islands. "And you must offer the state's minimum wage for that industry. So visas do not take away jobs from Americans. The jobs are offered to the Americans first."

Bishop said businesses on Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard hire more than 5,000 seasonal immigrants each summer as gardeners, housekeepers, cooks, waitresses and busboys at wages averaging \$9 to \$12 an hour.

The federal government has capped the number of seasonal visas at 66,000 annually, but the demand exceeded the cap for the first time in 2004. Since businesses get the visas on a first-come, first-served basis, those needing summer help are more likely to get turned down.

Last year, Congress passed a temporary fix sponsored by Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Maryland, that allowed seasonal workers to return if they had gotten a temporary worker visa in the past three years.

The law exempted these veteran workers from the cap, allowing 34,909 of them into the country between Oct. 1 and the first week of February, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

But the exemption expires next October, so Mikulski and Rep. Charles Bass, R-New Hampshire, filed a bill last week that would extend it to 2009.

"Many industries in New Hampshire and across the country depend on this program to stay afloat during their peak business seasons when they have been unable to acquire a sufficient number of American workers," said Bass. In New Hampshire, landscapers, ski resorts, apple cider makers, North Country resorts and timber operations hire seasonal workers.

Co-sponsors include congressmen from both parties in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and Connecticut, including New Hampshire's entire congressional delegation.

"Our seasonally dependent economy requires that businesses throughout Maine be able to hire the workers they need to accommodate the thousands of visitors who come to our state each year," Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, said in a statement. "This is not a partisan immigration issue -- it is an issue of economic fairness for small businesses across the country."

But Egan said extending the exemption was "crazy" and came at the expense of ordinary, working Americans.

"There is certainly no shortage of unemployed Americans -- or Americans who have dropped out of the labor market -- who could do these jobs," Egan said. "Employers will tell you Americans just don't want to do these jobs anymore. But that's not the case. The fact is, Americans will do any kind of work. They just won't do it for less than they need to support their families."

He also said the increased use of seasonal immigrant workers in places such as Cape Cod is hurting the ability of students to find summer jobs.

Supporters of the bill said the resort season generally starts before college students get out of school for summer and continues after they go back.

Crystal Williams, of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said worries about security since Sept. 11, 2001, are fueling anti-immigrant sentiment that will make the bill a tough sell.

"Immigration overall has become the whipping boy," she said. "So there has become this very negative tone about immigrants and that has fed the unwillingness to actually take on this cap and address it in a meaningful way." ■