

Wisconsin Dells, Wis. / Suddenly, summer labor in short supply

Visas, weak dollar limit foreign workers

Associated Press

05/25/2008

Some Wisconsin Dells employers are facing a labor shortage this summer because of changes to a national temporary guest-worker program and the weak American dollar.

Tommy Bartlett Show & Exploratory General Manager Tom Diehl is feeling the change.

"We have 27 (foreign workers) this year," Diehl said before the Tommy Bartlett Show opened its season Friday night. "Usually, we have no less than 60."

The nationwide crunch among tourist-town employers comes after Congress failed to renew a provision that exempted returning foreign guest workers from counting toward the limit of 66,000 per year. Without the exemption, the limit for the H-2B visas was reached remarkably quickly this year.

Some Dells resorts and attractions have gotten around that hurdle by hiring college workers on summer travel and work visas, known as J-1s, which aren't as restricted by the government.

But as the region has grown into a year-round destination, employers need laborers for more than the summer, said Jerome Grzeca, an immigration attorney in Milwaukee.

"The problem is that if they really want that person to stay around, there's no legal way for them to hire that unskilled worker after four months," Grzeca said. "It's a service-sector economy, and there's a lack of local workers and lack of interest in these types of positions."

H-2B visas are good for up to a year, depending on the employer's needs, and can be extended for up to three years.

At Noah's Ark water park, which employs about 300 area residents and 200 foreign workers every summer, Tim Gantz, president and co-owner, and Shelly Rucinski, director of operations, have been thwarted in their attempts to extend visas or obtain green cards for their best foreign employees.

Also, as the American dollar has weakened against the euro, potential student workers from places such as Poland and Hungary are no longer so interested.

"They can now go to England and Ireland to work and practice their English rather than spending the \$1,500 to \$2,000 in airfare and visa fees" to come here, Rucinski said.

Rucinski and Gantz are recruiting elsewhere. About 50 students are lined up to come from Nepal. However, no one knows how the students' professional and cultural expectations will mesh with the rest of the team.