

Firms push to extend exemption of H-2B

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For many H-2B landscapers, this could be the last summer in St. Louis.

On Sept. 30, the number of workers eligible to come to the U.S. under this program will be cut nearly in half.

While H-2B itself is not in danger, it is capped at 66,000 people. In 2005, Congress passed a law exempting prior H-2B recipients from the cap, an exemption that, so far this year, has brought almost 65,000 workers here, according to U. S. Customs and Immigration Services.

But that exemption expires at the end of this month, and the handful of industries that have come to rely on H-2B — landscaping, tourism, fish processing — are lobbying heavily for its renewal.

The cap exemption, which applies to workers who have spent three years under the same employer and followed H-2B's guidelines, has helped some companies create a stable work force while allowing room for growth, said Hank Lavery, president of Save Small Business, a Maryland-based group that advocates for H-2B.

"It's been great," he said. "It's worked out where if a worker follows the rules, he can come back."

The problem, Lavery said, is that the cap of 66,000 is reached quicker every year. It resets each October, but companies who need their workers in summer, or even spring, may be too late.

Last year, the exemption was renewed at the last minute, and Lavery's group is building congressional support for another extension. But in the wake of repeated failures to pass comprehensive immigration reform, the companies, and workers, that rely on H-2B say they don't know what to expect anymore, except uncertainty.

— TIM LOGAN