

St. Louis firms fear economic hit if guest worker visa program not renewed

By Tim Logan

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Scott Muehlhauser doesn't employ any immigrants, legal or otherwise, at his landscaping equipment company, Scott's Power Equipment.

But he is worried that his company, and many others like it, will become casualties of the running battle over immigration if a guest worker program that legally brings thousands of landscapers from Mexico to metro St. Louis each year is not renewed.

If that happens, dozens of local commercial landscape companies that use the worker program will have to scale back dramatically next spring, including Muehlhauser's customers. Some will close. Others will cancel contracts. They certainly won't be buying any new riding mowers, he said.

"If they don't get their workers, I lose probably 50 percent of my business," Muehlhauser said. That is \$3.5 million. "If I lose \$3.5 million, I probably won't be able to keep my doors open."

It is a problem that will be faced by other companies that supply the landscape industry — truck dealerships, mulch makers, seed sellers — and it is a snapshot of how deeply immigration, both legal and not, is intertwined with the region's economy.

Far from the hot spots of the border states or the halls of Congress, dozens of St. Louis-area companies are closely watching this relatively obscure guest worker program, and many say their future depends on it.

It is called the H-2B visa program, and it is designed to bring in workers for nine months to fill seasonal jobs that employers say they can't find Americans to do. It is popular with hotels in some resort areas, with fish processing plants on the East Coast, and with landscaping companies, dozens of whom imported 2,700 workers to the St. Louis area alone last year to mow, trim and mulch in the summer heat for \$8 or \$10 an hour.

Nationally, the government caps the program at 66,000 workers a year, though demand has grown fast and two years ago returning workers were exempted from the cap. Now the real number of workers participating in the program is much higher: estimates start at 100,000. But on Oct. 1, that exemption ran out, cutting the program back to 66,000, and efforts to renew it are stalled in Congress.

If nothing changes, local landscapers say, they won't be able to fill jobs next spring. Half of the 66,000 slots already have been gobbled up by ski resorts and other winter seasonal industries; the other half won't be available until April, when landscaping season here is already under way, and competition will be fierce.

"It's probably going to be the most challenging spring I've ever seen," said Fred Haskell, president of U.S. Lawns in Defiance. He hired 18 workers through the program last year, out of 27 total employees. Next year, he hopes to bring in 22, with a total staff of 30. If he can't, he is not sure what he will do, but he knows he will be earning, and spending a lot less money.

That message, and the argument they are playing by the rules and not hiring illegals, is one that local landscapers carried to Washington last week to press lawmakers for a solution. But given the hard-edged politics surrounding immigration, the likelihood of one remains unclear.

A measure to continue the current system and allow returning workers has passed the Senate but met opposition in the House-Senate conference from some Hispanic lawmakers who said they object to dealing with immigration-related matters on a piecemeal basis. Now it is caught up in negotiations aimed at a broad spending bill, according to congressional aides.

A spokeswoman for Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., said Bond supported extending the law. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., generally opposes extending guest worker programs until problems in them can be worked out.

The plan has drawn fire from critics, like the Federation for American Immigration Reform, who say it depresses wages. Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Washington group that advocates for less immigration, calls landscapers' arguments that they can't find Americans to fill their jobs "a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"There are countless examples of very difficult jobs Americans are willing to do if they're paid properly," he said.

Gregg Rohlfing disagrees.

He runs the Greenwood Group, a St. Charles County landscaper, and 38 of his 50 employees are on H-2B visas. He has tried to hire Americans time and again, he said, but doesn't have much luck. They don't apply. If they do, often they don't last, he said; there are easier ways to make a buck.

So he relies on the visas, and particularly on a core of returning workers who come back each year. His business has grown and he had planned to add two more work crews, buying trucks, trailers and equipment worth \$90,000 apiece, most of it from Scott's Power Equipment. That buy is now on hold.

So are Muehlhauser's plans. His company has grown fast since he launched it six years ago, with sales climbing sixfold. Today he has three stores, in Overland, Arnold and O'Fallon, Ill.

"And I employ 15 American workers," he said.

He was planning to add four or five more early next year and to open a fourth store. Instead, he is worried about keeping what he's got.

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