

# New West

## SNOW CAPS

### Visa Shortage Sends Resorts Scrambling

**A little-noticed change in visa laws is having a big impact on ski areas, which are struggling to fill job openings for the winter as a result.**

By David Frey, 9-14-08

Western ski resorts are finding themselves pinched for employees this coming winter, thanks to a cap on visa workers that has all but eliminated their usual stream of foreign workers who fill thousands of jobs.

The shortfall sent Michael Berry, president of the [National Ski Areas Association](#), to Washington last week to lobby legislators for help in what has become an unusual sideline in the national immigration debate.

Berry is hoping to eliminate the crunch in time for this season, but while legislators were sympathetic, he says, most weren't very supportive.

"I think it's made worse in an election year," Berry said from Washington. "Nobody wants to get hung out in an election year on a complex and controversial subject."

Making matters worse, he says, various groups on all sides of the immigration debate seem to be aligned in the goal of making matters worse and forcing major immigration reform, one way or the other.

"Oddly enough," Berry says, "at this point it's convenient for them to block everything in an effort to pursue their own agenda at a future date and ratchet up the urgency."

At issue for ski resorts is a program that lets employers bring in short-term workers from around the world on H-2B visas. Ski resorts, seaside resorts, national park concessionaires and other destinations have used these visas for years to fill seasonal jobs, from baristas to lifties. Lodges, hotels and coffee shops are run by a United Nations of workers. Summer resorts often rely on Eastern Europeans who take their college vacations to work at Martha's Vineyard or Key West. Winter resorts look to the Southern Hemisphere for workers who trade summer holidays Down Under for snow up north.

Those visas are capped at 66,000 each year, or 33,000 per summer and winter seasons. In recent years, though, returning workers have been exempted from the cap. That has allowed many to come back year after year, like Australian ski instructors who jump hemispheres to stay on the snow.

Congress didn't renew that exemption this year, though. As a result, resorts hit the cap before winter areas were able to apply for most of their workers. Employers can't apply more than 120 days before the workers are expected to show up for duty. The cap was hit before applications for November could even be processed.

Resorts expected the impacts would be limited to some 1,700 returning ski and snowboard instructors, Berry said. Instead they've found all or nearly their visa workers have been cut out altogether.

"We'll probably see very few H-2B people in the country this year," Berry says.



Australian ski and snowboard instructors walk through Snowmass Village in this 2006 photo. Changes in visa laws have made it harder for winter resorts to hire foreign workers for the upcoming season. David Frey photo.

Vail Resorts, for instance, sought 1,900 H-2B visas for its five resorts and its hotel company, about 13 percent of its 15,000-person staff. For the upcoming season, only the snowmaking crews, a fraction of the overall request, were approved before the cap went into effect because their jobs start in October.

Across the mountains in Aspen, the Aspen Skiing Co. fared better than many resorts but still saw its visa request cut in half to 200.

“The H-2Bs really affected the large resorts,” says Tom Jankovsky, chairman of the trade group Colorado Ski Country USA. That group is also lobbying lawmakers to ease up on ski areas.

In the meantime, ski resorts are scrambling to fill job openings. Anticipating a small pool of H-2B visa workers, Vail Resorts created a new director of recruiting position to try to meet the need, says spokeswoman Kelly Ladyga. It has also tapped into software to scan the country for summer H-2B holders in an effort to persuade them to extend their visas. Vail Resorts is also planning some 30 national recruitment efforts, including college campus recruiting, direct mail and marketing its job Web site.

“This is the most comprehensive, state-of-the-art recruiting program that we’ve ever implemented,” she says.

Other resorts are trying similar methods. Many also use student visas to fill their ranks.

“To say that it’s something we can work around, we’re working very hard to figure that out,” Berry says, “but the fact of the matter is, you look at where these resorts are located. Whether it’s in the East in Vermont or in the West, there isn’t a huge labor pool. By and large, we have nearly full employment in the country, especially in the West and Northeast. The reality is, the H-2B visa program is particularly important to us.”

Berry says he’s hoping legislators will attach a provision to another bill that would reinstate the cap, at least for a year, to help resorts fill open jobs. Few legislators seem interested in a “piecemeal” approach to immigration reform, though, he says.

“To some extent,” Berry says, “the whole H-2B visa program is really being held hostage as part of a greater discussion on immigration reform.”