

## Migratory visa measure taken for wild ride

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Racetracks, carnivals and traveling circuses are bracing for shorter circuits this season as Congress remains entangled in the renewal of a migratory worker visa program.

Businesses across the nation are pleading with lawmakers in a grass-roots effort to renew an extension in the H-2B visa program that allows returning workers to enter the country without being counted toward the program's 66,000-person limit. The program provides visas for all sorts of seasonal workers, from amusement ride operators to horse grooms.

Circus Chimera, a traveling circus, has already scuttled its entire 100-city tour, running February through October. Owner Jim Judkins is now turning his efforts toward lobbying Congress to extend the visas, after the loss of half his summer immigrant staff forced him to lay off full-time American employees.

He's working with other circus owners to organize public hearings.

His other business, the migrant worker recruiting company JMJ Workforce Agency, is also struggling. The agency provides about 3,500 workers to larger circuses such as Carson & Barnes, the nation's largest traveling tent circus. This year, Judkins said he could provide only half the usual workers.

"It makes no sense to make workers and businesses that are following the law suffer while they're held hostage," he said.

The H-2B extension has been renewed annually since 2005. But last year, the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act got tangled in the comprehensive immigration debate and was not renewed.

Business lobbyists tried to attach the measure to last year's omnibus spending bill, among other legislation, but were blocked by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. The lobbyists are attempting to attach the H-2B renewal to new immigration legislation as a way to entice business support, and they say House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has supported such a move.

"There are a broad array of immigration reform issues that many members continue to discuss with the speaker, and she continues to listen to those concerns," said Pelosi's spokesman, Nadeam Elshami.

Hispanic Caucus Chairman Joe Baca (D-Calif.) said he recognizes that "H-2B visa fixes are an important part of the immigration crisis, but that should be another check mark in the column why this Congress must take real action on immigration reform."

The H-2B Workforce Coalition is organizing grass-roots lobbying efforts for more than 1,300 small-business owners trying to break the congressional stalemate.

The work force coalition is headed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association. And it helped organize several "fly-ins" to lobby on Capitol Hill, one of which attracted more than 700 landscapers, concession owners and businessmen.

Coalition President Hank Lavery said the movement has gained bipartisan support from the House and the Senate, including Sens. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) and John Warner (R-Va.).

But despite the fly-ins, letter-writing campaigns and meetings on Capitol Hill, business owners complain that lawmakers are offering support but little has been accomplished due to the Hispanic Caucus' hold — a move coalition members say is



The program provides visas for all sorts of seasonal workers, from amusement ride operators to horse grooms.  
Photo: AP

ironic.

“Their efforts to block consideration are hurting the very same Hispanic-owned and -operated small businesses they are claiming to want to help,” said American Hotel & Lodging Association legislative director Matthew Rhodes. “Essentially, the CHC is playing politics with this issue, and Hispanic businesses are being put at severe risk as a result.”

Lobbyists are asking Pelosi and other lawmakers to help maneuver around the Hispanic Caucus and attach the visa provision to a second economic stimulus package that might emerge later. Attempts to put it in the first package failed.

“We are all so frustrated,” said Mike Williams, CEO of North American Midway Entertainment. Williams’ company is the leading operator of carnival midways and is facing a growing shortage in ride and concession stand operators.

“We feel like we have lobbied to no avail,” he said. “We just want to run our businesses.”

Racehorse trainers at Delaware Park near Wilmington say the visa delay has caused a more than 40 percent reduction in their temporary work force. Trainers are planning to cut the number of race entrants, which could cause a decline in the season’s races.

“We’re doing everything we can to get workers, but it’s work a lot of people don’t want to do,” said Bessie Gruwell, executive director of the Delaware Thoroughbred Horsemen’s Association. “Most people don’t like being to work at 5 a.m.”

NumbersUSA and other immigration-control groups lobbying against the H-2B extension argue that bringing foreign workers into the country will take jobs that could be filled by unemployed Americans. Many are collaborating within the Coalition for the Future American Worker.

Federation for American Immigration Reform lobbyist Robert Tennyson said he’s had to do little lobbying work on the issue so far — internal dissent between the business community and the Hispanic Caucus has kept the bill in reliable gridlock.

The groups do not agree with the Hispanic Caucus on immigration reform issues, but both parties are determined to block the extension.

“There is no reason for us to expend energy if the bill is being stalled through their incessant squabbling,” he said. “We’re relying on coalitions hitting each other over the head to stop it.”

But NumbersUSA Government Affairs Director Rosemary Jenks says the Hispanic Caucus’ blockade is probably temporary.

“I don’t think it’s a plausible long-term plan,” she said. “The businesses’ interests have so much money stacked behind this bill.”