

First Tracks!! Online Ski Magazine

The ski and snowboard world at your keyboard

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No More "G'day, Mate!" or "Hey, Mon!" At The Ski Lifts?

News - Resorts

Washington, DC - American ski resorts have for many years relied heavily upon international workers to fill seasonal positions unable to be filled from the domestic workforce. Many long-time international workers on H-2B temporary work visas and ski resorts across the country, however, face two major immigration-related developments that have occurred over the past eight days that have the potential to limit ski resort services and drive skiing and snowboarding prices skyward this winter.

Whether due to a limited local population, or a population uninterested in low-paying manual labor positions, many American ski resorts often rely upon seasonal international labor to man lifts, make snow, teach skiing and serve food. H-2B visas, granted to visiting temporary seasonal employees engaged in non-agricultural labor, are limited each year by a quota set by the federal government. An exemption from the cap for returning workers, however, expired on September 30, 2007 and has not been renewed by the U.S. Congress. Additionally, the cap of 33,000 H-2B visas for the first half of fiscal year 2008 was reached on October 1, 2007. Any visa applications submitted after September 27, 2007 will thus be rejected by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials unless and until Congress steps in and helps the ski industry and other businesses that rely upon seasonal labor.

A bill called the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act of 2007 was introduced in Congress earlier this year. In this bill, returning H-2B workers were slated to be permanently exempt from the H-2B visa quota. This bill, however, has not been passed and the ski industry has been notified that the cap has been reached and all pending H-2B applications will be returned. The cap was reached earlier than normal this year because, in part, Congress has to date failed to renew the returning worker exemption from the quota.

With the quota reached so quickly, many recreation and tourism based businesses say that they've been blindsided with the fact that most, if not all of their returning H-2B workers cannot return and work. This issue particularly affects ski resorts because ski resorts often don't start their employee recruitment process until mid-September to October.

Estimates indicate there are at least 50,000 outstanding H-2B applications. Even if Congress adopts a retroactive exemption for returning H2B workers and the cap is opened back up, applications submitted after September 27, 2007 are not likely to be processed in time for the Christmas holidays, a critical time period for the ski industry.