

US ski resorts suffering in foreign worker visa row

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Holidaymakers could find themselves stranded in US ski resorts with half the lifts open and not enough ski instructors to meet demand. The warning came from the boss of a recruitment website due to a shortage of skilled foreign worker visas. The company, Seasonworkers.com, which is used by more than 2,000 UK companies to advertise seasonal vacancies, reported that a deficit in the number of H-2B (Home to Business) visas being processed for the 2008/09 season could have serious implications on businesses that rely on this foreign labour force. Managing director **Mick Briggs** said: "Some companies have seen nearly a 50% drop in the amount of staff they have been able to send over to the US resorts. "This, in turn has affected their relationships with the resorts and ultimately their business."

He added: "The only feasible way to stem this potential crisis is for winter sectors to work closely with the summer sectors and offer new jobs to existing H-2B holders, enabling them to extend their visas. "If this doesn't happen, you could well end up with no lift operators or ski instructors because resorts would struggle to fill the positions with US residents as it's only seasonal work."

Thorin Magbie, head of HR at Mount Snow in Vermont, said: "Mount Snow has had to scramble to find quality, qualified ski instructors. Our guests have grown accustomed to meeting our great ski and snowboard instructors from across the globe. "Without enough ski and snowboard instructors we would run the risk of turning guests away during our peak periods."

"The bottom line is that it had been a great cultural exchange to have the European, Australian and South African instructors at Mount Snow and although we have made great efforts to fill the gap left by the H-2B crisis, we are disappointed that the issue is still unresolved." Until October 2007, 160,000 short-term workers were admitted to the US each year through the H-2B Visa program.

But this quota was slashed to 66,000, with the total allowance split equally between each half of the fiscal year. The situation was further exacerbated by US Congress letting an exemption from the cap for returning workers expire.

H-2B visas are awarded to qualified individuals from around the world for short-term job placements. In ski resorts, these include lift operators, ski instructors and rental technicians. As employers cannot apply for H-2B visas more than 120 days before employees are contracted to start work, resorts have already hit the cap for the winter season before being able lodge applications for most of their staff.

It is estimated that there are at least 50,000 outstanding H-2B applications with the larger resorts expected to be hit more severely as the peak winter season approaches. Outbreak Adventure Recruitment, a UK employment agency that provides staff to ski resorts in the US, including Mount Snow, agreed that the reduced cap on H-2B visas has had a major impact on the industry. Owner Robert Mos said that his US placement business had dropped by two-thirds.

"All we can do is work closely with our resorts and make sure they are applying for the H-2B visas as early as possible," he said. "We are advising applicants that, even if they are successful in the recruitment process, there is still a chance that they are rejected and not able to work." Vail Resorts applied for 1,900 H-2B visas for its five resorts and hotel company - approximately 13% of the overall workforce. Only snowmaking crews were approved before the cap went into effect because their jobs start in October."

The **National Ski Areas Association** (NSAA) and other industries have been lobbying Congress for passage of a last minute amendment to extend the returning worker exemption, however even if Congress adopted a retroactive exemption for returning workers and raised the cap, it is unlikely that outstanding applications would be processed in time for the start of the season.

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