



Local Businesses Feel The Impact Of Fewer Legal Foreign Temporary Workers

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Many seasonal small businesses across eastern Carolina, like the rest of the country, say they face the possibility of closing this summer. It's all due to a change in a legal way those businesses were allowed to hire temporary foreign workers.

Some of those businesses, like Grandy Farm Market in Currituck County, haven't even opened their doors yet this season because of it. Colin Grandy's business of 21 years sits empty as he waits for those workers. They come here on temporary worker permits known as H2B visas, after passing a criminal background check. This year...no workers.

Whitecap Linen in Columbia in Tyrrell County, which services many of the Outer Banks hotels and cottages, is in the same boat. Whitecap Linen General Manager Rick Foister says, "This year we had requested for them to come in the first of April. As it stands right now we won't be getting any of those employees."

Here's the problem. The U.S. Grants 66,000 of the H2B visas a year. They go to the states that need the workers first. This year the visas are already gone. There had been an exemption for temporary workers who had been here before, meaning they did not count against that cap, and could return to where they previously worked. That exemption has expired and Congress has not renewed it. Those who rely on the workers say Hispanic lawmakers are blocking a vote on the legislation, as they push for immigration reform, including amnesty for people here illegally. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus, representing those lawmakers, argues such visa programs protect the employer, at the expense of the worker.

Sherri Carawan of Mattamuskeet Seafood in Hyde County fears her business will close if there is no resolution. She has been lobbying Congress to take action. She told lawmakers, "You're asleep now, but you wait until May and June when all the summer peak load businesses are scrambling to hold onto their businesses then and then you're going to wake-up."

While the H2B program is a legal way for foreigners to come to the United States to work those temporary jobs and then return home, there are those who are against the visas altogether. Critics argue they take jobs away from Americans, and if employers paid more, Americans would take them.

The employers who rely on H2B workers say the wages are set by the Employment Security Commission and that they are largely low-wage, low-skilled jobs that are only going to pay so much. They say it's kind of a catch-22. They could pay more, but that cost would then be passed onto consumers who may not buy those goods and services.

As for hiring locally, Whitecap Linen has a sign in front of its business but is having no luck. Foister says, "The people that we find that come to put in applications, they just don't stay at the job. They will work a few hours, maybe they'll work a day and we don't see em back again." Carawan says she can't find any workers either for the temporary jobs.