

Gregg aids fight to extend visa program

Tuesday, May 20, 2008

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DOVER — U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg and his colleagues won a key battle to extend the H-2B visa program that will allow New Hampshire hotels, restaurants and other tourism businesses to hire the foreign workers they need.

Gregg said the Senate Appropriations Committee's passed a three-year extension of the H-2B returning worker provision this week, according to a prepared statement issued by his spokeswoman, Laena Fallon. The amendment is contained in the emergency supplemental appropriations bill, which now heads to the full Senate for possible consideration.

"Congress must now act," Gregg said in the statement.

Fallon said Monday afternoon the amendment represents an important step to securing the extension. She explained the Senate has to decide whether the amendment will remain in the appropriations bill and then the U.S. House of Representatives will also have to approve the measure. Fallon said Gregg is hopeful Congress will approve the extension some time in June.

The news is especially encouraging for many of New Hampshire's ski resorts such as Waterville Valley that have traditionally hired a number of foreign seasonal workers as waitstaff, chambermaids and other positions.

Tom Day, the resort's general manager, said 25 percent of his workforce is made up of international employees. He said he has up to 15 foreign workers employed this summer and as many as 100 foreign workers during ski season. He said many are students ages 18 to 22 who come from countries such as South Africa, Chile and Brazil.

When the current law expired in September Day said the resort was unable to hire 65 foreign workers last winter and that put a tremendous strain on the ski area.

He said it costs Waterville Valley up to \$700 per person just to bring over each foreign worker. The resort provides them with a place to stay and each worker has to pay for their room and board, Day said.

Day said Waterville Valley has done the H-2B visa program for 18 years and it has always served the resort's seasonal labor needs well.

"It's a fun addition to the resort environment to have people come here from other countries," Day said.

Gregg co-sponsored an amendment along with U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., that exempts returning seasonal workers from the national cap of 66,000 visas.

The original law to provide this returning worker exemption, which Gregg authored, expired on Sept. 30, 2007, leaving many businesses in New Hampshire and throughout the nation with an inadequate workforce, according to Fallon.

"Significant parts of New Hampshire's economy rely on seasonal workers, who become increasingly important in many of our high tourism areas during the busy summer months," Gregg said.

He said that without these workers some of these businesses would face severe labor shortages.

"This bipartisan amendment restores a key provision in the H-2B program that frees up additional visas and rewards companies and foreign workers that play by the rules," Gregg said.

The amendment was needed because Congress failed to renew the H-2B visa law last year before it adjourned, which prevented foreign workers who came to the United States over the last three years to return for another season without being counted against an annual cap on such workers.

The number of H-2B visas for non-agricultural seasonal and temporary workers is capped at 66,000 annually. As the program has grown more popular, Congress in recent years has passed extensions that exempted returning workers from the annual cap.

The latest extension expired Sept. 30. That capped the number of H-2B visas at 33,000 for the first six months of fiscal year 2008 — less than half the number of visas issued for the same period a year ago. There were 71,000 H-2B visas granted for the first half of fiscal 2007, including about 38,000 for returning workers.

Pat Corso, president and CEO of the Mount Washington Resort, applauded the amendment because she said it is vital for the Mount Washington Resort in Bretton Woods to be able to hire foreign workers.

"Here at the Mount Washington Resort, we currently employ over 450 full-time employees and 300 part-time and seasonal workers, of those 300 between 60 to 80 use H-2B visas for our prime winter and summer seasons," Corso said.

Corso said if they could not hire those workers, the resort would be forced to scale back its operations, which would force the resort to cut some seasonal and full-time jobs.

Employers cannot apply for visas until 120 days before the employee will start working. Business owners usually do much of the paperwork and pay fees on behalf of workers. Employers need to provide proof to the government that they cannot hire Americans for the jobs.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.