

N.H. businesses rely on foreign workers Gregg pushes for visa extension

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New Hampshire businesses may have an easier time keeping temporary summer workers if the U.S. Senate approves an extension on worker visas.

Summer employees at Canobie Lake Park in Salem are among those who could benefit from the amendment to H-2B visas. The amendment was authored by Sen. Judd Gregg, R-N.H. It will now go to the full Senate.

Tim Pearse, operations manager at the park, said Canobie has employed up to 20 foreign workers a year during the summer season, mostly European college students.

Those students, who work as ride operators and food vendors, start classes later in the fall than American students, so the park doesn't have to worry about finding replacements during the height of its busy season, according to Pearse. Foreign workers typically work into September, while local college students head back to campus about a month earlier.

"One benefit is the cultural exchange that happens," Pearse said. "Our workers come from different countries and cultures, and we have a very diverse group of people who come to the park."

He said the pay rate for those jobs is around \$7.50 per hour.

The Senate Appropriations Committee passed a three-year extension of the H-2B returning worker provision last week. The visas allow New Hampshire businesses to hire people for nonagricultural jobs that cannot be filled locally.

An exemption for H-2B visas expired on Sept. 30, 2007, leaving many New Hampshire employers to compete for a smaller pool of foreign workers, Gregg said.

More than 80 percent of H-2B employees in New Hampshire work in the hospitality industry, according to Michelline Dufort, president of the New Hampshire Lodging and Restaurant Association.

"They are an essential part of New Hampshire businesses," Dufort said. "Tourism depends on these workers."

Employers can hire H-2B workers only after they advertise locally and cannot find people to fill their jobs, Dufort said.

Without the ability to hire temporary workers, employers are faced with the prospect of making do with fewer employees, which can negatively impact customer service, Dufort said.

She credited Gregg with listening to New Hampshire businesses when the provision for H-2B visas expired.

"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 in a written statement. "Without H-2B workers, some of these businesses — such as hotels, restaurants, and landscapers — will face severe labor shortages and reduced operations that impact our state's economy."

Without the amendment, Gregg said, businesses are being shut out of the H-2B program, and are forced to operate at less than full capacity.