

## Resorts lobby for visas for returning workers

Kyle Magin  
Bonanza Staff Writer  
October 26, 2007

Despite recent developments in the U.S. Senate, the local ski and resort industry is still battling in Congress to bring back skilled international workers on temporary visas.

Those workers, supplied by the still-elusive H-2B visa program, cannot enter the country because of a quota imposed on seasonal employees. The skilled workers perform tasks that haven't been filled by U.S. workers; they work as lift mechanics, ski coaches and instructors and even managers.

Bob Roberts, California ski industry association executive director, said recreation industry employers are no longer hoping to hire new H-2B workers. Rather, they are interested in getting returning seasonal workers back to their positions.

"What we need is for Congress to declare an emergency extension for returning H-2B workers," Roberts said. "It probably isn't in the cards to get any new ones, but we should at least get the returning workers exempted from this quota so they can get to work."

Last week, Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md. introduced an emergency one-year extension, which was tentatively approved by the Senate. The proposal now goes before a House-Senate conference committee, before being voted on in both houses and ultimately signed or vetoed by President George W. Bush. No date has been scheduled.

The proposed extension would allow H-2B employees from last year to come back to work in the U.S. without counting against the quota.

Roberts was pleased with the proposal though he had concerns about its timeline.

"For our resorts we need this bill to pass through in a week, two weeks maximum," Roberts said. "We want to have these workers here by the holiday season. Bottom line is that we need to get this done ASAP."

A 33,000-person quota for seasonal help expired well before resorts were able to clear all of their winter H-2B employees, which left them scrambling for skilled labor.

The rush to fill positions vacated by H-2B employees is on at local resorts. Ed Youmans, ski resort manager at Diamond Peak, said two job fairs last weekend produced solid results, but didn't net employees to fill the void left by seasonal workers.

"We were pretty successful, but we didn't fill the holes left by our H-2B guys," Youmans said. He added that he has had limited success in converting some of his H-2B visa holders to J-1 visas, which are available to students and not subject to the seasonal worker quota.

There are two assistant managers at Diamond Peak who are H-2B returnees and not eligible for J-1 status.

"We hope we'll be able to get these guys here for the start of the season, we need them," Youmans said.

In total, Youmans said the Diamond Peak job fairs Saturday and Sunday netted around 30 new employees.