

Resorts scramble to find help after visa crisis for ski workers

Kyle Magin
Bonanza Staff Writer
October 10, 2007



[Click to Enlarge](#)

[Browse and Buy Nevada Appeal Photos](#)

Ski industry advocates are mounting a large-scale lobbying offensive in Washington, D.C., to combat a rule that could send resorts across the nation into crisis mode.

Immigration restrictions regarding H2B visas - visas meant for foreign skilled seasonal laborers - are making it hard for resorts to import the international help they need for the upcoming ski season. These workers are generally experienced and invaluable to ski areas, resort officials said.

Lobbyists are asking Congress to exempt winter H2B employees from a government quota on the international workers' entry. Generally, winter resorts recruit and hire H2B employees in September and October. This year however, the government immigration quota for those workers was met on Oct. 1, before many resorts could hire their employees. Winter resorts are calling on congressional leaders, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate

Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. to help them so operations run smoothly for the 2007-2008 ski season.

They are asking Congress to re-authorize a measure allowing resorts to bring back returning skilled international employees by exempting them from the quota.

In previous years when the quota was filled, Congress exempted returning workers from the quota, thus allowing them to work the entire season without having to reapply for a visa and face rejection.

"It's a crisis of timing," said Bob Roberts, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association. "We are using our contacts in Congress and a very aggressive lobbying campaign to get an exemption from this cap."

The practical ramifications are readily apparent at local ski areas.

"It's going to be a bit of a problem because these guys are experienced employees, including two assistant managers who have been here for five years, and it doesn't look like they will be here in time to start the

Bonanza Photo - Jen Schmidt Bee Ferrato speaks with a contact about housing this winter for H2B workers if they are allowed into the country. As director of the Child Ski Center at Diamond Peak, Ferrato will be one of those most affected by the immigration cap on H2B visas. Many of the foreign workers have been returning for years or are newly recruited by Ferrato's assistant director Ignacio Alsogaray, who holds an H2B visa and is currently waiting in Argentina.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

[Browse and Buy Nevada Appeal Photos](#)

season," said Ed Youmans, ski resort manager at Diamond Peak.

The Incline Village resort employs about 14 H2B workers. The loss of these workers could mean more work hours for Youmans and his staff.

Russ Precaro, the director of communications at Heavenly Mountain on the South Shore, voiced similar concerns. Precaro said Heavenly employs 40 to 50 skilled international workers.

"The H2B people we hire are ski instructors, lift mechanics and snow makers, fairly skilled workers," Precaro said. "It's going to be difficult to hire in people to fill those positions. Plus, these people have been with us for a few years now, so we really want to get our own employees back."

The need for international workers is urgent, according to Susan Johnson, the director of human resources for IVGID, which owns Diamond Peak.

"We recruit locally and run ads locally, but we just can't get local kids to fill these positions. We'd love to give them jobs...but it seems like they are more interested in enjoying the amenities," Johnson said.

Youmans echoed her statement.

"I'd give local kids jobs if I could find them, but there just aren't enough people in that age group who want these jobs," Youmans said.

Precaro, Youmans and Roberts are all confident Congress will allow skilled international workers in, it's just a matter of when. Getting the workers to the resorts by the busy weeks of December is a priority, Youmans said.

"We'd like them to be here for opening weekend and are working every angle we can to do that," Youmans said. "I'm trying to be optimistic, but it doesn't look like we'll get them here in time."

Roberts said he believes the workers will get here, he just didn't know when.

"I'm reluctant to say when this will get sorted out," Roberts said. "I think it will be nip and tuck, if the hills open by Halloween, we'll be in trouble. But, if we don't open until December, I think there's a good chance we'll get them here by then."

A spokesman for Reid said the senator is committed to fixing the problem.

"Sen. Reid supports the H2B program and is working to get the returning worker exemption re-authorized as soon as possible," Jon Summers wrote in an e-mail.

Resorts are trying to fill the void left by the skilled international workers with alternatives, for now.

Youmans said Diamond Peak may rely heavily on J-1 employees - international student employees who come to the United States while school is out. Because many of these type of employees come from the Southern Hemisphere, countries like Peru and Argentina, their summer school break mirrors a Tahoe winter.

"The drawback is that they can't stay as long, they have to be back to their home country by March - in time for school to start," Youmans said. "But if it means we have to work short-staffed throughout March, that's what we'll have to do."

Youmans said some of his H2B workers who are still in school are trying to reclassify themselves as J-1 visa employees to work this upcoming year.

"These kids may lose a lot of money because they've already paid for plane tickets out here if they can't get exempted or reclassified as J-1," Youmans said.

The winter-sports industry isn't the only business affected by a lack of skilled international employees. Casinos and hotels, like the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe, also use H2B employees.

"It will have an impact on the Hyatt, but we won't feel it like the ski hills will," said Mark Pardue, Hyatt's general manager. Pardue explained that the Hyatt employs 30-35 people with skilled international visas.

"We look for more skilled workers to fill our staff from the H2B visa program, and it will be more difficult, but we'll have to rely more on J-1 visa workers," Pardue said.

If getting internationally skilled laborers continues to be a struggle through next year, Youmans said Diamond Peak will look to other areas of the nation to fill the void left behind by these employees.

"We're probably going to look at the northeast and other parts of the country to get workers in here. We can't afford to have this type of problem again next year," Youmans said.