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Ski areas strained by federal limits on foreign workers

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Many Sierra ski resorts could face a shortage of key employees this season due to federal regulations limiting the number of foreign workers allowed into the United States.

Ski schools in particular could be hit hard if Congress doesn't amend the rules, resort operators said.

"It's kind of a nightmare for us," said Ed Youmans, general manager of Diamond Peak ski resort in Incline Village. "It's very serious."

For years, ski resorts have depended to a large degree on seasonal workers from places like Australia, New Zealand and South America. The bulk of those workers -- lift attendants, parking aides, restaurant workers and the like -- are brought in by student visas.

Those workers are unaffected by the current problem, which instead involves visas used by skilled workers who typically work at resorts for a longer period than the students.

A cap of 33,000 so-called "H-2B" visas was reached Oct. 1 and ski resorts learned this week that all additional applications will be rejected by the government unless Congress acts to remove the quota. Legislation to do so has yet to be acted upon.

Roughly 200 of the 1,500 to 2,000 foreign workers California resorts planned on bringing in this season could be prevented from doing so, said Bob Roberts, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association.

The positions are typically veteran ski instructors, snow-making experts and ski patrol specialists, Roberts said. Others are involved in food and beverage work.

"This has a real impact for us," Roberts said. "Clearly the industry is pretty concerned with this."

At Diamond Peak, 16 employees the resort is depending upon could be impacted, including the Argentine who works as the assistant director of the Children's Ski School and the assistant director of the Adult Ski School, a New Zealander.

"This could put us in kind of a dire situation," Youmans said.

Impact ahead

Should Congress fail to change the situation, the resort will do its best to fill the positions with other people, but otherwise some reduction in services to the customer is possible, Youmans said.

"Ski school is by far the biggest concern," said Chip Seamans, general manager and chief operations officer at Kirkwood Mountain. Thirty-one Kirkwood employees could be affected, including 16 returning to the resort after working previous seasons, Seamans said.

"They are experienced instructors that are very valuable to us and difficult to find in the states," Seamans said. "This has definitely got our attention."

The ski industry association plans to begin actively lobbying Congress to correct the problem on Monday, Roberts said. Last year, a similar situation was temporarily fixed by U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., who was concerned about potential impacts on her state's soft-shell crab industry, Roberts said.

Because the issue affects far more industries than ski resorts alone, Roberts said he is confident the problem will be successfully addressed. But with the season so near, time is short, Roberts said.

"We're confident," agreed Russ Pecoraro, communications director at South Lake Tahoe's Heavenly ski resort. At Heavenly, about 50 of the resort's 1,500-person work force could be affected.

"When it does get passed, we're ready to act right away, get our employees out here and get them working," Pecoraro said.

More foreign workers are using the H-2B visas due to changes made after the 9/11 terror attacks, Youmans said. After it was discovered some of the 9/11 hijackers were in the country on student visas, rules were changed to require that only foreign students actively enrolled in school can use student visas. That forces many to leave work to return to school when ski season is still in full swing.

That in turn prompted more foreign resort employees to use the other visa, which allows them to stay in the United States longer, Youmans said.

This year's problem does not impact Mount Rose Ski Tahoe, which elected not to hire employees using the H-2B visa due to extensive paperwork involved, said Murray Blaney, director of base operations.

Mount Rose can rely less on imported workers because of its close proximity to the Reno work force, Blaney said.