

Visa cap shakes up ski resort staffing

Visas for Squaw, Northstar in the clear, but not for Sugar Bowl, Alpine Meadows

By Adam Jensen and Julie Brown
Sierra Sun, jbrown@sierrasun.com
October 10, 2007

Pending last-minute federal legislation, several Tahoe ski resorts may have to recruit local applicants to fill front-line staff positions that have been traditionally occupied in recent years by international seasonal employees using guest-worker visas.

Through the passage of the Save Our Small and Seasonal Business Act of 2007, ski industry officials expected returning international employees using the H-2B visas to be exempt from the national annual quota of 66,000.

But neither house of Congress has yet passed the law.

International ski industry employees typically come to the United States to work by using either J1 or H-2B visas.

J1 visas require workers to return as a full-time student to a university following employment.

H-2B visas are generally used by employees who return year after year.

“They are coaches, snow makers, ski instructors — professionals with skills that we need,” said Executive Director Bob Roberts of the California Ski Industry Association.

In the past, employees approved for H-2B visas within the previous three years have been exempt from the annual cap.

The exemption lapsed on Sept. 30, and applications for the 33,000 H-2B visas allowed during the first half of the 2008 fiscal year were received by the next day, according to a press release from Diamond Peak Ski Resort in Incline Village.

Further H-2B visa applications will be rejected until the federal law passes, potentially preventing hundreds of international employees from working at California ski resorts, Roberts said.

While Squaw Valley and Northstar received their H-2B visas before the quota was filled, officials from Sugar Bowl and Alpine said they are counting on the federal legislation to grant access for a significant number of

A ski resort employee hitchhikes in Truckee during a past ski season. A glitch with visas for foreign workers may impact the area ski industry. Sierra Sun file photo



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their seasonal staff.

“[Our international employees] bring a real energy to the mountain,” said Rachel Woods, spokesperson for Alpine Meadows. “They’re enthusiastic about being here. They love to ski and snowboard, and I think that translates really well to our guests.”

Alpine Meadows planned to hire 40 international employees from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, South Africa and Brazil — 20 of whom were returning to the ski resort after past seasons. Sugar Bowl is waiting for 100 visas.

“You get their hopes up and then you have to tell them that there’s a chance it’s not going to happen,” said Judy Lee, head of Alpine’s human resources. “It’s disappointing for both of us.”

Lee said Alpine’s ski school would be hit the hardest if the visas are not granted. The resort will look to fill the vacant instructor positions domestically, and will pursue prospective employees at job fairs as well as through online recruiting.

“Yeah, we’ll be scratching our heads trying to figure out how we can get more people here,” Lee said.

Sugar Bowl will also pursue job fairs and recruit employees at college campuses if the visas are denied, said Marketing Manager Jennie Bartlett.

Officials from Squaw Valley and Northstar said they received their requested H-2B visas because they submitted their applications well before the due date.

“The director of Squaw Kids has done [recruiting] for six years,” said Savannah Cowley, spokesperson for Squaw Valley. “She understands the game. She’s not only on top of her deadlines, she’s ahead of them.”

Squaw does most of its recruiting in the spring and files applications during the summer months, Cowley said, noting that Squaw does not foresee a problem obtaining H-2B visas next year either, whether or not Congress approves the stopgap legislation.

Northstar’s 132 H-2B applications were approved because they submitted them “as soon as they possibly could,” said spokesperson Kirstin Cattell.

“We do have a lot of [international employees] returning, and that’s one of the reasons why the H-2B’s are really valuable,” Cattell said. “They’re valuable employees because they not only bring the international flair, but they also just know the mountain really well — just the way any returning employee is really valuable.”