

Cutting Mexican guest worker program hurts landscaping businesses



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CLEVELAND -- The failure of Congress to fully implement the H-2B guest worker visa program this year has landscapers scrambling to hire laborers locally.

For years, Mary Wheeler, of Wheeler Landscaping in Auburn Township in Geauga County, has provided seasonal employment for 25 to 30 legal Mexican guest workers.

They are drug-checked and background-checked.

They arrive every spring, work, pay taxes, send money home to their families, and return to Mexico in the fall.

Many return to work for Wheeler year after year.

But this year, when the Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill failed in Congress, the H-2B guest worker program was cut by two-thirds.

Through a lottery, Wheeler Landscaping was allowed to hire its usual guest workers. Other landscapers were not.

Jerry Schill, of Schill Landscaping in Sheffield Lake, had to hire local laborers.

He received 400 applications but 75 percent of the applicants didn't make it to a second interview because they failed the drug test, had felony records including sex crimes, or had their driver's license taken away.

Schill was able to hire the workers he needed, but several have already quit saying, "This is not a job for Americans."

The jobs pay \$8 to \$14 an hour to start, with a potential to earn \$20 plus.

Most landscaping companies cannot raise their charges to make up for the higher labor costs, and the costs of recruiting, screening and training a less stable workforce.

Sandy Munley, executive director of the Ohio Landscapers Association, said, "Unfortunately, there are going to be companies in our industry that will probably lose their businesses over this."

The U.S. House Immigration subcommittee has scheduled a surprise hearing at the start of the landscaping season on Wednesday, April 16.

A Congressional vote to return H-2B guest worker visas to the previous level would provide a much-needed infusion of reliable labor to the landscaping industry.