

Tourism in state needs visa program

Published: Sunday, December 23, 2007 - 2:00 am

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Between April and the end of October, tourists flock to our state's beaches, mountains and resorts, creating a significantly larger need for employees than during the rest of the year.

Tourism businesses, especially along the coast, work extremely hard to recruit local people to fill these jobs, but there just are not enough available and willing to work the short season or drive long distances for the work available. In the past, students filled many of the jobs, but through the years more and more students opt to take internships and travel instead of taking temporary summer employment.

To help bridge the gap, years ago Congress developed the H2B visa program to allow short-term, non-agriculture workers from foreign countries to fill temporary seasonal jobs after a business demonstrates it has made every effort to hire residents living legally in America. Historically, only 66,000 of these guest workers are allowed to enter our country each year. Three years ago, when increased labor demands could not be filled by local workers, Congress approved a measure artificially raising that cap by not counting the international workers who return year after year. Congress must re-approve this returning worker provision by Oct. 1 each year in order to allow time for the required paperwork.

Guest workers must be screened and approved before being approved for visas. They cannot have a criminal record or have ever been caught in the United States illegally. At the end of the season, these workers must return to their home country. Key to the certification process to obtain legal workers is the requirement to prove that no qualified American citizen wants the work.

Unfortunately, Congress adjourned for the holiday break without passing the returning worker provision, making it doubtful that any seasonal guest workers will arrive in time to help our upcoming summer season. Without guest workers, many tourism businesses will have to cut hours of operation, the services they provide, and potentially the number of hotel rooms that they can rent.

This will jeopardize those businesses' ability to serve guests, tourism sales, and tax revenue upon which our state depends.

While the South Carolina congressional delegation worked hard to protect our state's tourism industry and economy, 24 members of the Hispanic Caucus prevented the issue from being approved. This political gamesmanship could cost South Carolina and many other states a lot of lost revenue.

Upon their return to Washington in January, we urge Congress to do what is right to help the tourism industry.