

Congress leaves circuses hanging

By Bill Hankins

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Congress left circuses across the U.S. on the highwire without a safety net below when it broke for the holidays without taking action on the H2B immigration rule.

Without a congressional extension to the exemption to H2B, circuses will not be able to bring into the country the acrobats and workers they have always depended on, according to Jim Judkins, who handles all the immigration issues for Hugo's four circuses.

Carnivals and county and state fairs also will be affected, along with many other industries that hire seasonal workers.

H2B is the program that allows immigration for seasonal employment by workers who come into the U.S., work during a season, then return to their homelands.

Two years ago, when the need for foreign seasonal workers was greater than the 66,000 allowed each year by H2B, Congress voted to grant exemptions to those who had already been allowed into the country and who had paid taxes, abided by the law and returned home as they were supposed to.

This year, that extension was allowed to sunset and die, and Congress tied the measure to an appropriation bill that it could not pass before the December break.

Circuses, carnivals and fairs are industries that use only a portion of the seasonal immigrant workers. Hotels, landscaping and ski resorts draw most of the workers, and without the H2B extension even they are not getting enough workers this year.

The problem is the 66,000 quota for those allowed to enter the country each year was filled even before the year started.

Now, no industry in the U.S. that uses the immigrant workers has enough to fill its needs.

For some, it could mean closing the doors.

Circuses cannot book their seasonal stops without knowing it will have the acts to provide the entertainment fans expect, so for many it will be close the doors this year or go on a shortened season with fewer acts.

"All we can do is hope for them (Congress) to come back in January and do something, and even then it will likely not be in time for circuses to secure the acts and book the routes before the season traditionally begins in April," Alex Trevino of JKJ Workforce Agency said.

Trevino said even if Congress did take action on the H2B extension, it would be the middle of January before anything could be done.

Judkins already has announced his Circus Chimera will not take to the road next year.

His lobbying for the measure in Washington, D.C., found much support for the H2B extension, but little action toward getting it approved.

In 2008, it will be a waiting game for many circus fans who may be denied the excitement of the big top.