



Immigration reform could put rodeo in jeopardy

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By Sarah Nakasone / 11 News

The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo could be in jeopardy next year.

The reason? Immigration reform.

An estimated 80 percent of circus and carnival companies in America depend on workers who are in the country with work visas.

But that's about to change.

They are the wheels that help make Texas state tourism go round, and the spokes of charitable giving are carnivals and fairs.

"Whenever there's a carnival ... there is a local, charitable organization that benefits," said John Meredith with the Meredith Advocacy Group.

But this year, many carnivals around the United States may not even get off the ground, including the rodeo.

"We're really going to have to start putting our thinking caps on," Chris Lopez with Ray Cammack Shows said.

That's because most companies that run local fairs rely on foreign workers. Many of those workers are in the United States legally through the H-2B visa program. It grants a 10-month stay to people who fill jobs that Americans won't take.

"Those of us who oppose illegal immigration want to use the legal means for our work that needs to be filled," Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said. "This is a legal way for us to meet those needs."

Last year there were 100,000 H-2B workers in the United States. But next year, Congress will only allow 66,000 -- most of which will be filled before carnival season starts.

Ironically, it's the congressional Hispanic caucus that's stood in the way of more temporary workers. Texas congressman Charles Gonzales said H-2B workers should be just one part of comprehensive immigration reform.

"There are many moving parts and until we get our arms around the entire issue, we will not have anything that's conclusive or effective," Rep. Gonzales, D-Texas, said.

But as a result, events like the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and the Arizona state fair are in jeopardy. The company behind these events employs nearly half of its workforce through the H-2B program. And its head said he'll try to find a way.

"The show has to go on," Lopez said.

This doesn't just affect fairs. The head of Circus Chimera out of Brownsville will not go on. The 2008 season has been cancelled due to a lack of workers.