

April 16, 2008, 6:05PM

Lawmakers plead for more foreign workers

By SUZANNE GAMBOA Associated Press Writer
© 2008 The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Three House members pleaded Wednesday for more visas for seasonal workers they said are needed immediately by seafood processors, resorts and other businesses in their districts.

Some of those operations could close or lose a lot of money this spring and summer because there are not enough visas, known as H-2B visas, for the temporary nonagricultural workers they need, the lawmakers told the House Judiciary immigration subcommittee.

"Not having H-2B workers will significantly affect the businesses within my district and their ability to keep a professional, trained and dependable work force," said Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich. He was joined by Rep. Tim Bishop, D-N.Y. and Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, R-Md.

Prospects for relief are uncertain. Attempts to increase H2B visas are trapped in the debate over immigration reform.

House negotiations on the issue and a pending immigration enforcement bill broke down before the Easter recess. Supporters of a more sweeping immigration bill oppose the piecemeal approach, while opponents of guestworker programs argue it would hurt American workers.

Passing any bill raising foreign workers' numbers also is a prickly undertaking in an election year.

The hearing occurred on the same day Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers raided Pilgrims Pride poultry plants and Shipley Do-Nuts in Houston in search of undocumented workers.

"This issue is collapsing on us," said Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas. "This is one of the most difficult times to move (on the businesses) because we are in a fragile economic state."

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., said Congress has not shied away from fortifying U.S. borders, including providing \$3 billion emergency border security funding last year.

"This Congress has acted quite a bit on border security and interior immigration enforcement, but has not yet acted much in the area of addressing immigration policy fixes," she said.

Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers suggested policy fixes may have to come piecemeal.

"I am thrilled that some people are still talking about comprehensive reform," said Conyers, D-Mich. "If I can figure out how that is going to happen, before we start breaking this thing down, I will be a developed and dedicated student to whomever is still arguing that."