

Scarce visas for workers have ski resorts shivering

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Utah ski resorts will make it through this winter but are worried about next season.

Not because of global warming, but because of another key national political issue - immigration reform.

Ski resorts are among a variety of businesses nationally that are affected by Congress' failure last fall to renew a law that allows foreign workers who came to the United States during the past three years to return for another season without being counted against an annual seasonal-worker cap.



Utah ski resorts are among the businesses concerned... (Danny Chan La/Tribune file photo)

That affects thousands of ski industry workers, most from South America and Australia, who fill chairlift crews and positions in restaurants, hotels and shops.

"We depend on them," said Mark Paterson, human resources director at Snowbird Ski & Summer Resort. "We can't find enough locals to do the jobs, even recruiting nationally."

Those foreign workers have entered the United States on H-2B visas for nonagricultural seasonal and temporary workers. The law caps the number of those visas at 66,000 annually. But because the visas proved so popular with seasonal businesses, Congress had passed extensions that exempted returning workers from the cap.

The latest extension expired Sept. 30, however, a victim of the bitter political fight over a comprehensive immigration bill.

Organizations such as Ski Utah, marketing arm of the state's ski industry and 13 resorts, lobbied the state's congressional delegation for the extension.

But their efforts failed. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus was among extension opponents, contending it represented a piecemeal approach to immigration that diluted support for a broad reform package.

Paterson could see trouble coming last fall, got his forms in early and was able to fill his employee ranks. But in talking to H.R. counterparts at other resorts, he found that "some were extremely hard hit. I know some resorts that didn't get a single visa.

"We are certainly concerned for the future," Paterson added, noting Snowbird is competing now with resorts across the nation for H-2B visas for its summer season and next winter.

Deer Valley Resort will start feeling the pinch at the end of this season, said international recruiting coordinator Stephanie England.

The H-2B crunch prompted the exclusive Park City-area resort to bring in scores of foreign workers on J-1 visas, which are good for only four months. So those who arrived as the season started must depart before the lifts shut down.

"Most have to leave at the middle to end of March. That will put us in a world of hurt," said England, agreeing with Paterson that this winter's woes could be mild compared to future seasons if Congress does not resolve the problem.

"It could have huge lasting repercussions. It makes it spooky," she said. "And it makes it hard for the internationals if we don't even know if we can hire anybody."

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* THE ASSOCIATED PRESS contributed to this article.