

Immigration debate snares seasonal businesses

By Andy Sullivan

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - John Graham's crab company has held its own for 65 years as the local catch has dwindled and cheap Chinese crabmeat filled the supermarkets. It might not survive the immigration debate in the U.S. Congress.

Graham relies on temporary workers who come from Mexico to pick crabmeat from the shells because he can't find enough employees in Hampton, Virginia. But a program that allowed him to bring back experienced workers quietly expired last year after Congress failed to overhaul broken immigration laws.

Now his business is in trouble. Crab season begins next month, but Graham expects his cavernous picking plant on the Hampton waterfront will sit idle.

"We're going to mop up all these buildings and let them sit here and cave in," he said. "I haven't slept for three weeks."

Thousands of small businesses across the United States rely on foreign, seasonal workers to shuck oysters, mow lawns, clean hotel rooms and pick crops because there are not enough Americans willing to do such work. The high-tech industry says it needs skilled workers from overseas to write software because there are too few Americans qualified to fill those jobs.

Those business needs have been hung up in a broader national debate over immigration. A Bush administration-backed compromise that would have created a new guest worker program and given the 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States a chance to become citizens collapsed last year in the face of stiff opposition from some conservatives who said the focus of the debate should be securing the border against undocumented newcomers, not assisting those in the country illegally.

With President George W. Bush in his final year in office, most experts believe it will be up to the next president to tackle a major overhaul of U.S. immigration laws. But some say Congress could tinker around the edges to address the urgent needs of U.S. businesses.

"There is the possibility that there will be an effort to move a narrower package," said Craig Regelbrugge, who represents an agriculture group that has been pushing for immigration reform.

As a recession looms, many seasonal businesses are scrambling to find workers or making plans to scale back.

The 66,000 slots available under the existing visa program for temporary seasonal workers are not nearly enough to satisfy the demand and usually are snapped up within a day or two.

In the past, businesses have been able to exceed the cap by bringing back workers they've hired before using what are known as H-2R visas, but that provision of the program expired last year.

The Wintergreen Resort in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains faces a shortfall this summer of roughly 40 dishwashers, chambermaids and janitors who will not return from Jamaica. That means one in five of these jobs will go unfilled.

"It's a borderline disaster," said Jeff Duncan, Wintergreen's vice president for human resources. "People are going to notice it when they start going to the resorts and eating in the restaurants -- there's no servers and there's no clean dishes and the beds aren't changed."

In Hampton, on the Atlantic coast 175 miles south of the U.S. capital, Graham expects revenues to plunge this year without the 100 Mexicans who make up the bulk of his workforce. Locals aren't interested in work that's only available for six months out of the year, he says, and competition with cheap crabmeat from East Asia prevents him from increasing wages enough to attract them.

With his factory shuttered, crab fishermen will have no place to sell their catch, he said -- which could spell the end of a centuries-old industry.

"We're talking about coastal heritages and traditions that were founded on the waterfront, that have been in place for generations," he said. "It's dwindling all the time but this will be the nail in the coffin."

(Additional reporting by Donna Smith, editing by Patricia Zengerle)