

Foreign worker restrictions hit Mt. Snow hard

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DOVER - In the midst of a winter season that, by all accounts, should have kick-started the ski industry in Vermont, Mount Snow recruiters are still scrambling to track down ski and snowboard instructors as they are forced to turn away families and beginners.

A cap on foreign seasonal workers visas has meant that the ski resort could not hire anywhere near as many foreign workers as in prior years to operate the mountain.

The number has been placed at roughly 175 foreign workers this year, but director of human resources Thorin Magbie refused to confirm or deny this number. He did say, however, that the amount is significantly less than most years.

He said the mountain was not able to get any H2B visas, for seasonal temporary workers from abroad, and has had to supplement with workers on student visas, but these can't help with the more experienced positions, like ski and snowboard instructors, and many of the students will need to return to school before the end of the ski season.

The learn to ride program at the mountain is "a large and important part of our business," Magbie said. "There's a lot of never, ever skiers, both adults and children, and we're having to turn people away."

Instructors still come in from all over New England, New York and New Jersey, Magbie said. "We always would have a preference for local employees, but Mount Snow is in a very rural market. We do everything we can to find local staff, but it's a limited pool."

While the cap has been more lax in past years, the controversy over immigration has forced politicians to stick to the maximums they had set. Only 66,000 visas were allowed this year, and this was reached in October, leaving the ski industry out in the cold.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., says this issue has caused a mire. "The sharp disagreements over immigration policy have undermined even the temporary solutions that we have proposed."

He says he has been pushing a number of initiatives to help with this problem, but so far they have not been successful.

"This visa program has been important to Vermont's tourist industry for many years," Leahy said. "We have succeeded in enacting temporary fixes, but we need a long-lasting solution that is fair and dependable for the employers and workers who need to make their plans."

He was among a number of legislators from both sides who recently signed a letter to President George W. Bush asking the president to order the Department of Homeland Security and Labor continue an expired program that does not count returning workers toward this cap. That would allow around 40 or 50,000 more workers into the country but, so far, this has not happened.

"To help overcome this stalemate, we have asked the president to consider using his administrative authority for short-term relief," Leahy said of the letter. "I hope he will listen and that he will realize how difficult and how urgent this situation has become."

Magbie said the mountain planned to be optimistic and recruit both H2B and student visa workers for next winter. "I'm very hopeful that our representatives will recognize that this smaller seasonal worker issue is important to Vermont's economy and we won't have this issue going into next year's season."

For Mount Snow, this restriction is particularly frustrating in a year where the new owners, Peaks Resorts, spent a lot of money on new air snow guns and other upgrades to make the mountain more appealing.

"There's been a lot of re-interest in Mount Snow this year. I'm nervous. I don't know if they're not going to try skiing this year at all, or not try Mount Snow, or not try Vermont," Magbie said.

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