

## Immigration reform hits Vermont resorts

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From staff, wire reports

A standoff in Congress over immigration reform is hitting home at Vermont ski resorts this winter and causing summer businesses to adapt.

Stowe Mountain Resort, for example, usually relies on about two dozen seasonal, foreign workers as ski instructors. Not this year. Stowe had to do "heavy duty recruiting" for its ski school, including a first-ever hiring clinic in January, said human resources director Julie Frailey.

"We need to find some folks," Frailey said. "We do whatever we can without dropping our standards at all."

Ski resorts are among the first of several seasonal businesses nationwide to feel the pinch from a change in federal law that cut back the number of visas for foreign workers brought in for temporary or seasonal jobs. Hotels, restaurants, seafood processors and landscaping companies are worried about filling jobs they say they can't find Americans to do.

"You have a season where everything is lined up perfectly," said Parker Riehle of the Vermont Ski Areas Association, noting several healthy snowfalls and optimal ski conditions this winter. "Yet some of the resorts were a bit shorthanded to deliver some of the customer service."

This season, the lack of a returning worker exemption left at least 300 positions open at Vermont ski resorts, Riehle said; the vacant positions are spread among ski instructors, culinary workers and housekeeping staff. Ten of Vermont's 19 ski areas rely on foreign, seasonal workers, he said. They made up about 8 percent of the state's seasonal ski resort work force of 9,000 employees.

"It's very, very difficult to fill all those jobs with local Vermonters," he said, noting some resorts will hire high school students to help on busy weekends, including the upcoming Presidents Day holiday.

Stowe Mountain Resort will not have a problem meeting the needs of visitors, resort spokesman Jeff Wise said. "We've hired to fulfill our needs and we are fully prepared for Presidents Day weekend," he said.

Extending the "returning worker exemption" to the visa program got "caught in the gears of much broader immigration reform" in Congress this past year, Riehle said.

Before adjourning last year, Congress failed to renew a law allowing foreign workers who came to the United States over the past three years to return for another season without being counted against an annual cap on such workers. Key lawmakers balked at a renewal unless it was part of a comprehensive immigration reform plan.

The number of H-2B visas for nonagricultural seasonal and temporary workers is capped at 66,000 annually. As the program has grown more popular in recent years, Congress has passed extensions exempting returning workers from the annual cap.

The latest extension expired Sept. 30. That capped the number of H-2B visas at 33,000 for the first six months of fiscal year 2008 -- less than half the number of visas issued for the same period a year ago. There were 71,000 H-2B visas granted for the first half of fiscal 2007, including about 38,000 for returning workers.

Summer complications

Summertime businesses are also dealing with the constraints.

The Basin Harbor Club in Ferrisburgh relies on workers from Jamaica, South Africa and eastern Europe to provide about 20 percent of its 300-employee work force, said the resort's human resources director, Rachel Novak.

The visa restrictions won't create a labor shortfall this summer because the lakeside resort recruited foreign workers already in the U.S. and helped arrange to extend their visas. Visa extensions don't count against the visa cap, she said.

Foreign workers who have returned each summer, however, will not be able to work at Basin Harbor Club this season -- and that will change the dynamic for guests and staff alike, she said.

"What we are going to see is a hit on our returning staff ... they are family to us. That is going to hurt," Novak said.

Dennis Watson, for example, has traveled from Jamaica each summer for each of the past eight years to work in the resort's kitchen. This year, he can't get a visa, she said.

"The local people have grown accustomed to see Dennis every season. And they won't this year," she said.

Lobbying efforts are under way to avoid the visa cap problem for next year, Novak said.

"We are all vying for a limited number of people -- summer resorts and winter resorts are all in the same boat," she said.

"We have seasonal needs, and the number of applicants is limited."

"There is a renewed effort in the House to craft what is being described as a 'scaled-down' immigration reform bill," said Andrew Savage, spokesman for Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt. who is a co-sponsor of legislation that would renew the returning worker exemption.

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