



Seasonal Businesses Struggle

Stowe, Vermont - February 4, 2008

The Stowe Mountain Resort employs about a thousand people, including a hundred foreign workers -- from Jamaican housekeepers to Latvian ski instructors. Usually about thirty of them are in the United States on a non-student work visa known as H2B.

But not this year.

"We missed the cap so we didn't get any," said Julie Frailey, director of human resources at Stowe.

That cap is a national quota that restricts the number of visas to 66,000 a year. It used to be that returning workers did not count toward that quota. But this year, they do.

"We've relied on them, in particular because they're all trained," Frailey said. "They come back every season, they know the mountain, they know the guests. They're our core full-time people so without those folks, it's been a challenge."

And the Vermont Labor Dept. said Stowe isn't alone.

"The business community, I know, those who use this kind of workforce, is pretty upset about it," said Andy Condon, the state's chief of economic and labor market information.

"The so-called H2B foreign worker visa process is quite a bit more restrictive now than it has been in the past few years," he said. "A lot of businesses, the resorts in particular, are having a hard time getting an adequate labor force because they can't get the foreign workers they have typically depended on."

Resort officials said the problem stems from an immigration reform bill being debated in Congress. An earlier provision, which allowed about 50,000 returning foreign workers to obtain a visa without counting toward the quota, was eliminated. The Vermont Labor Dept. said that because it is a federal program, the state doesn't have much influence. But businesses here may be affected.

"I think there's going to be positions left unfilled," Condon said, "which means other people are going to have to pick up the slack or certain services simply aren't going to be offered."

Stowe said it has been trying to recruit workers locally, advertising in newspapers and hoping people here apply for jobs. But the Labor Department said it can be tough attracting workers to seasonal, part-time work in rural areas where resorts tend to be located. Stowe's human resources director said the resort has had to get creative.

"We actually just had a ski instructor job fair training weekend, which we have never ever done in history," Frailey said. "We had to go out in January and recruit some more instructors."

With ski season only halfway over, resorts are already worried about their summer staffs. The Vermont Labor Dept. said the national quota for summer H2B visas was filled January 3rd.

The Basin Harbor Club said it has about twenty longtime employees who won't be able to come back this summer. Both it and Stowe are hoping some workers who are already here will be able to extend their visas. But the process has been frustrating.

"The cap was met and the door was closed," Frailey said. "It was like don't even bother. It was terrible. It was terrible."

[Kate Duffy](#) - WCAX News

