

Oct. 1, 2007, 1:08PM

Ski Industry Faces Labor Headaches

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MONTPELIER, Vt. — A change in federal law could make it harder for northern New England's ski industry to find enough workers this season, officials said.

Parker Riehle, the president of the Vermont Ski Areas Association, said he was still hopeful Congress would change the law to allow foreign workers who came to the United States over the last three years to return for another season without being counted against an annual cap on such workers.

Riehle said Vermont's 18 ski resorts rely on the H-2B program for about 10 to 15 percent of its workers. At its winter peak, the ski areas employ about 22,000 people.

"We're coming down to the wire throughout the month of October," Riehle said. "It's the critical time for us to determine where the numbers are."

In fiscal 2006, the U.S. admitted a total of 122,511 foreign workers under the H-2B program. Of the total 50,854 were returning workers, said Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration services.

"Potentially you are looking at a loss of 50,000 workers," Saucier said.

Half of the workers admitted under the H-2B program are for winter employment and half are for summer employment. Saucier could not say how many of the returning workers were winter or summer workers.

Riehle said he was hopeful Congress would renew the provision.

"The exemption has been approved overwhelmingly in the past," Riehle said.

A spokesman for Vermont's U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, a Democrat, said there were bills pending on Congress to renew the returning worker exemption, but he didn't know their status.

Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Democrat, has supported efforts to make the returning worker exemption permanent. One such effort was a part of the now-dead comprehensive immigration reform bill, said Leahy spokesman David Carle.

"There may be an effort in coming weeks to try for another temporary extension," Carle said.

Nationwide, about 5 percent of the ski industry's workers are hired through the H-2B program, said Geraldine Link, the director of public policy at the Colorado-based National Ski Areas Association.

"The availability of H-2B visas is a significant issue for a number of resorts across the country," Link said.

If the returning worker exemption isn't renewed, it would be hard on the ski industry and other seasonal industries.

"The ski industry would be competing with other winter users of H-2Bs for a smaller number of visas than in years past," Link said in an e-mail. "The only good news for the ski industry is that we tend to need workers in late fall for training purposes, so we apply earlier than most winter businesses for those visas."

"NSAA and its member resorts are lobbying hard to get an extension to the exemption for returning workers," Link said in an e-mail. "Like many other affected businesses, we are looking to Congress to do the right thing this fall and either permanently or temporarily extend the exemption for returning workers."

If the returning workers are excluded, all workers would be considered within the 66,000 H-2B worker cap.

The federal Save Our Small and Seasonal Business Act of 2005 allowed workers who had previously held H-2B visas to return without being counted against the annual 66,000-worker cap, Saucier said.

In 2006, the State Department issued 71,687 H-2B visas while 50,854 people returned without being counted against the cap, said Saucier.

The original act expired after two years but was reauthorized by Congress last year for another year. That extension expired on Friday, Saucier said.

In Maine, there are about 4,000 full-time equivalent jobs in the ski industry, according to the Ski Maine Association. But Maine resorts don't rely on foreign workers anywhere close to what Vermont does, in part because the state gets about a quarter of the number of skiers each year.

Sunday River ski resort in Newry, the biggest ski resort in Maine, has about 20 foreign workers for the season, from the United Kingdom. But the resort hasn't had any visa problems this year, said Sunday River spokesman Alex Kaufman.

Karl Stone, spokesman for Ski New Hampshire, said the organization doesn't keep track of the number of people working in the state's ski industry. According to the U.S. Labor Department's bureau of statistics, 1,370 people worked in the New Hampshire ski industry in 2006, but that figure does not reflect peak season employment. The number of foreign workers was not available.