

OPINION

Workers wanted

October 3, 2007

Congress needs to act quickly to reauthorize an exemption in the nation's immigration law so ski areas in New England and around the country are able to bring in the workers they need for the coming ski season.

Ski resorts in Vermont employ about 22,000 people at their peak, and about 10 to 15 percent customarily come to this country seasonally under the H-2B program, which provides them the necessary visas. But the H-2B program operates with a cap amounting to 66,000 workers. In the past, returning workers were not counted against the cap, which allowed the actual total of workers to exceed 100,000. This year, that exemption requires renewed congressional approval or the ski industry will be missing about 50,000 workers.

Rigid immigration enforcement has been one reaction to the events of Sept. 11, but it would be foolish to allow fear of terrorism to undermine the ski industry for no good reason. It is time to stop looking at every policy question through the prism of terrorism and to look at reality.

The reality is that skiing is an important form of recreation and engine of economic activity in many areas. There is no reason to allow a quirk in the law to undermine an industry that so many depend on.

Young people from many countries enjoy the opportunity to see America while working in America's tourism industry. That is good for them and for us. The H-2B exemption for returning workers must be renewed.