

WYOMING BUSINESS REPORT

Labor woes intensify for Wyo tourism industry in '08

By Phil Noble

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JACKSON – Tourism industry operators in Wyoming are in a state of shock over the cap on the number of legal foreign workers for the summer travel season being reached just as the New Year started, according to the Wyoming Lodging and Restaurant Association (WLRA).

The program that allows hotels, restaurants and other tourism-related businesses to use seasonal foreign “guest” workers is called the H-2B visa program in government parlance.

“In effect, no employer with a start date of May 3 or later will be able to use H-2B seasonal workers this year,” the WLRA said in a communiqué to its members.

As if the industry didn’t have enough labor woes, this government program falls far short of the number of workers needed for Wyoming’s tourism season.

What this means is that operators will have to work longer hours and do a lot of the housekeeping tasks the temporary seasonal foreign workers normally perform. Many are also shortening hours for their establishments, which dampens the overall economy.

It’s not that the industry hasn’t tried to recruit locally, but young workers, college students for example, who can take seasonal jobs are in very short supply and have been for some time. And, operators say, many no longer are willing to fill what they think of as “lower level” jobs.

Some operators have also tried recruiting older, retired workers but are having the same problems there.

So tourism operators have increasingly relied on temporary “foreign guest workers” to fill those jobs, and in just the last few years the government’s H-2B visa program has not provided the numbers of workers Wyoming’s tourism industry needs to get through a busy summer tourism season.

One hotel owner in Jackson admitted that she was thinking of getting out of the business she loves because it has become a “constant struggle” to run an operation without enough workers. Managers are called on to fill in and perform jobs they long ago outgrew in their job functions, like making up beds and cleaning toilets.

It doesn’t take long for the average manager, the hotel owner pointed out, to “burn out” on the job when they are trying to be both a manager and a room attendant and wind up working 14 hours a day.

The congressional attempt to fix the immigration issue last year ended up going nowhere, leaving the tourism industry with a severe work shortage.

Members of the hospitality industry will increasingly try to lobby their congressional representatives to at least mend the H-2B program separately from the larger issue of immigration reform, which has polarized the country on many fronts.

If the worker issue is not resolved, tourism operators in Wyoming are in for another long, exhausting summer.