

Senator introduces bill to extend visa program

By Noah Brenner

April 3, 2007

U.S. Sen. Mike Enzi introduced a bill this week that could help Jackson employers get visas for foreign seasonal workers.

Enzi co-sponsored the Small and Seasonal Businesses Act of 2007, which would continue an exemption for workers who have already participated in the H-2B visa program. The last extension on the exemption is set to expire on Sept. 30. The bill would continue the exemption for five years.

"Being able to have workers during a crucial period during the height of tourist season, for instance, is vital for businesses," Enzi said in a release. "This is not meant to be a permanent solution. Until comprehensive immigration reform can be agreed upon, this is a way to provide temporary workers to areas in need."

The H-2B visa program allows businesses to hire workers from outside the country for a limited time once the businesses have proven that no local workers are available to fill the job. The employer is held responsible for terminating the employment at the end of a specified time and the employee is required to return to his or her home country upon completion of the job. The visas apply only to workers in select industries, including construction, landscaping, hospitality and food service.

There is a cap of 66,000 on the number of workers allowed into the country under the H-2B visa program, but because of language in the bill, workers who renew H-2B visas from previous years will not count toward that cap.

"Businesses, especially in Cody and Jackson, need help filling service positions, and there aren't enough workers in the local work force to fill the void," Enzi said. "These H-2B visa holders come in to fill a specific job for a specified period of time and then return to their home country."

Figures from the Jackson office of the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services show that from Oct. 1, 2005, to Sept. 30, 2006, 186 Teton County employers signed up for the program and requested 2,028 guest workers.

Enzi has co-sponsored similar legislation in the 109th and 108th Congresses.