

Local landscape business joins others to band for extension of bill

Owners of 13 substantial New Jersey based landscape firms, one of which was Miles Kuperus of Farm-side Landscape of Wantage, traveled to Capitol Hill on Dec. 5 and 6 as part of an emergency "fly in" to press for an extension of the H-2B Visa Returning Worker Extension.

The H-2B Non-Immigrant guest work program provides a critical and legal source of seasonal labor, the businesses say. In conjunction with 700 leaders from same or similar industries around the nation, the message delivered was clear: Congress needs to understand the dramatic impact and negative economic ramifications that could result if they do not pass the "Save Our Small Business Act of 2007" (H.R.1843 and S.988) prior to the upcoming holiday recess or workers simply won't be available till June or July and by then it's too late. Senators Barbara Mikulski (D-MD.) and John Warner (R-VA.) have tried once again this year to extend the returning worker provision for 5 years.

Approximately 165,000 visas were issued in 2007. With the cap of 66,000 and the returning worker exemption not yet in place this leaves a shortfall of nearly 100,000 workers.

The rapidly growing landscape or "green" industry, itself a \$45 billion industry, is one of many in the United States that depends on temporary seasonal

workers to survive. Companies in the landscape, nursery, hotel-resort, restaurant-hospitality, sea food processing and home remodeling-construction industries constantly face shortages of temporary seasonal workers that Congress relieved through the program's returning worker exemption in years past.

This exemption mandates that returning workers who have had visas within the past three years not be counted toward the restrictive 66,000 annual cap. This provision, which rewards companies that follow the law, expired Sept. 30, 2007 despite extensive bipartisan support.

The Professional Landcare Network, (PLANET) an association of landscape designers, contractors, students and industry suppliers, estimates that the 2,800 land care companies nationwide participating in the H-2B program spend \$77.28 million annually on equipment, \$115.36 million on fleet vehicles, \$2.8 million on payroll services, \$6 million on computers, \$4.3 million on tires, \$13.6 million on communication.

As stated by Tom Delaney, Director of Government Affairs for PLANET, "The H-2B users in the landscape industry have a large impact on the U.S.



economy. If these companies suffer, supplier companies will feel the economic downturn as well."

It is estimated that 2.5 American jobs are tied to each H-2B seasonal worker, 6,000 in New Jersey. Clearly, the H-2B crisis puts at risk the welfare of many American businesses, workers and families. "And a significantly, Congress' failure to act is placing in jeopardy American jobs at truck assembly and equipment manufacture plants and other companies that support and supply our industry" says Delaney.

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