



Crab industry worries about few visas for pickers

March 24, 2009

Because would-be crab pickers haven't been able to get temporary visas, many crab processing plants in Dorchester County are expected to stay closed when the season opens on April 1.

And Chesapeake Bay area watermen want First District U.S. Rep. Frank Kratovil to do something about the situation.

On Friday, about 150 watermen and people representing other industries met with Kratovil at the A.E. Phillips packing plant in Fishing Creek. Crab pickers, mostly from Mexico, would be working at the plant but federal red tape prevents their arrival.

Each year for more than 10 years, people from Mexico and Central America have traveled to the Eastern Shore to work in crab processing plants. Only a few Dorchester residents, now nearly all senior citizens, continue to pick crabs for a living.

Young people from the area find work elsewhere. This is partly because they were not allowed into the picking houses as children, which is how previous generations learned the work. Maryland law requires crab pickers, who use knives, to be at least 16 (for which a permit is required) or 18 without parental permission.

At first, there were enough temporary worker visas not just for crab picking, but for landscaping, construction and other seasonal businesses.

But as Americans became concerned about immigrants taking residents' jobs, Congress began limiting the number of H2B visas and creating other obstacles for businesses that depend on temporary workers.

This year, the H2B program was limited at 66,000 temporary visas. None of those went to the people who had been working in Dorchester County's crab processing plants.

On Friday Kratovil discussed congressional legislation proposed to permit crab pickers and other seasonal workers to return to the United States this year.

He is among the original co-sponsors of House of Representatives Bill 1136, for which U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Michigan, is the chief sponsor. The legislation, Called the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act of 2009, is designed to allow any H2B temporary worker who came to the United States during at least one of the past three years to continue to qualify for another temporary visa.

As proposed, Kratovil said, the law would allow for a permanent extension of the H2B program which has, in recent years, been held up until new legislation was passed for its continuance.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Maryland, has proposed similar legislation in the U.S. Senate (SB 388), Kratovil said, but for only five years.

Kratovil has been working to increase support for HR 1136.

"I'm not Superman," Kratovil said Friday, explaining the limited powers of a freshman congressman. But he added, "I guarantee you, I will be fighting to get this resolved as soon as we can."

Kratovil asked people to explain how the loss of H2B workers will affect their livelihoods.

Jack Brooks is president of Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association. He said University of Maryland research found that every H2B temporary worker creates 2 1/2 jobs for Shore residents.

Bank of the Eastern Shore President Sonny Robbins, Gary Pinder of BB&T's Cambridge branch and Bill Marshall of the Bank of the Eastern Shore each talked about loans and mortgages held by watermen. They also said the temporary workers are bank customers.

Without the H2B workers, Marshall said, and with the increased harvest restrictions by the state, "We're on the verge of a collapse here."

Seafood buyer P.T. Hambleton of Bozman said watermen throughout the region will have nowhere to sell their crabs if packing houses close in Dorchester. "These plants are very important to all of us."

Joe Brooks of J.M. Clayton's crab processing plant in Cambridge pointed out that H2B workers pay income tax, Social Security and Medicare insurance, even though they will not benefit from Social Security and Medicare programs.

Brooks also pointed out that about 90 percent of the crabs caught by watermen is picked as crab meat. That means that when crab season opens April 1, without H2B workers, most crab packing plants will have no need for most of what is caught.