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## MARYLAND'S CRAB COUNTRY: NOT ENOUGH VISAS, NOT ENOUGH WORKERS

*An additional batch of seasonal visas is expected, but some processors who haven't gotten any so far are getting desperate*

By Scott Calvert  
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FISHING CREEK, Md. – Music blared as 21 Mexican women methodically cracked open steamed crabs piled high inside a cool, bright room. They picked out the meat and packed it into 1-pound containers that their employer, G.W. Hall & Sons, ships to wholesalers in the mid-Atlantic and as far away as Canada.

A half-mile down Old House Point Road, the picking room at a competing company, Russell Hall Seafood, was silent, no workers to be seen. Bare metal tables, normally heaped with crabs this time of year, gleamed.

The difference: one firm won the visa lottery, and the other lost.

This year, for the first time, demand for the low-skilled, seasonal H-2B visas was so high that the U.S. government awarded them by lottery. The result is uncertainty for businesses such as crab processors in this remote corner of Maryland's Eastern Shore that have relied on the program for years.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said the lottery was only fair, given the demand. By law 66,000 H-2B visas are available each year, divided between winter and summer seasons. For this summer season, businesses filed requests for more than 81,000 workers on Jan. 1, the first day possible, a record.

The guest-worker visas are coveted by landscapers, tourist businesses and seafood processors, especially with the U.S. unemployment rate at a 17-year low.

Opponents of the visa program, including some in the Trump administration, say businesses should try harder to hire locally and raise wages if necessary. As a candidate, President Donald Trump pledged to protect American workers from foreign competition.

The Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association, which represents the roughly 20 licensed processors in Maryland, says this year's randomized allocation has left the state's industry short about 200 workers, almost half the seasonal workforce, typically all from Mexico.

Relief may be on the way. DHS is expected to soon issue an additional 15,000 H-2B visas. But Maryland's desperate crab processors say even if they get visas, it will be weeks before any Mexican workers can make what for some is a 2,500-mile trek north, so the unlucky firms will remain sidelined as crab season kicks into high gear.

The unexpected worker shortage for some businesses has upended the economy on Hoopers Island. Processors that don't have pickers aren't buying crabs. Those crabbers aren't buying bait fish from local fishermen. The combination has slashed sales at the Hoopers Island General Store to its lowest level in six years, said owner Katie Doll.

"It trickles all the way down the line," said fisherman Burl Lewis, who normally sells a large amount of menhaden to Russell Hall Seafood but recently laid off a crew member from his 52-foot boat, the Trying Times. "The Mexican labor creates jobs for Americans. It's creating my job."

At the other end of the supply chain, wholesalers and retailers in places like Baltimore are scrambling to get locally sourced jumbo lump crabmeat. They are paying sharply higher prices amid reduced availability made worse by a slow start to the crab season due to the cold winter. Gibby's Seafood north of Baltimore is selling a pound of jumbo lump for \$43.95, about \$10 more than a year ago, said general manager Harrison Lockhart.

In 2016 Maryland's commercial blue crab harvest totaled 36.7 million pounds and had a dockside value of \$54.5 million, according to state officials. This includes the live-crab market and the processing sector.

Bryan Hall, the 57-year-old co-owner of G.W. Hall, founded by his grandfather in 1951, said he was fortunate to get the 30 visas he requested. Most of his Mexican crew has been on the job since the third week of April, and the rest are on their way.

But Mr. Hall criticized the lottery system. "It's not right for me to have the girls and not him," he said, referring to Russell Hall owner Harry Phillips. Mr. Hall said he voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 and wants the president to scrap the lottery and Congress to increase the statutory visa limit. "Trump can fix it with his pen," Mr. Hall said.

Mr. Phillips said he was expecting 50 visas as in past years. He said the H-2B program has brought him Mexican workers for 25 years, ever since he revived a defunct business that had closed as the local crab-picking workforce – principally women on Hoopers Island – moved away or retired.

"This lottery system is not a fair way to do it. It's just scary," said Mr. Phillips, 68. "You can't prepare yourself for the upcoming season by waiting to see if your name gets picked."

The labor shortage "is hitting us real hard," he added, and that means less work for the truckers he normally employs and less business for the box companies he typically buys from.

Many processors see the same Mexican faces each year. Anayeni Chavarria Ponce, 29, said she has worked for Russell Hall for nine years. Now she is stuck at home in Mexico's Hidalgo State, waiting to find out if she will return this year. "I'm worried," she said in a phone interview.

At G.W. Hall, 27-year-old picker Marisol Martinez said she can earn far more money picking crabs than she can make back home in Mexico. She said her income is helping her build a house, pay for two brothers' schooling and support her father. "I need to come here," she said.

Processors legally must pay the workers at least \$9.51 per hour, but most make a piece rate. At G.W. Hall that is \$3.15 a pound. Ms. Martinez said her maximum is just over 40

pounds per eight-hour shift, translating to about \$130 or \$16.25 an hour. Mr. Hall said 30 pounds a day is more common. Workers pay U.S. taxes like American workers.

Pickers live close to work. G.W. Hall, for example, houses them in two homes next to the picking house, charging each \$40 per week, utilities included. The employees typically spend about eight months in Maryland before returning to their home country, processors say.

Before they can use H-2B visas to hire foreign seasonal workers, the companies must advertise locally. But some processors say they have had little if any luck. Mr. Hall said he has had five American applicants in 20 years, none of whom showed up for an interview. One challenge in attracting local residents, he and others say, is that the jobs aren't year-round.

Aubrey Vincent said she hired about 20 non-Mexican workers this year to pick crabs for her family's business, Lindy's Seafood at its facility in Woolford, Md. Several are Cambodian-born women such as Sophy Pho, who said she has a green card and learned to pick crabs in Alabama.

Ms. Vincent also hired a mother-daughter duo from nearby Linkwood, Md. Tina Cramer, 66, said she needed a job and started picking crabs a week earlier alongside her 44-year-old daughter. "I really like it. I wish I could be faster," Ms. Cramer said.

But Ms. Vincent, 30, said local labor just supplements the Mexican pickers she needs. Lindy's was among the lottery losers this year, leaving the firm with 104 openings. On Hoopers Island, the company's big picking room on the banks of the broad Honga River is idle, and Ms. Vincent estimates lost sales of \$20,000 a day.

She said she worries she might lose some customers for good if she can't ramp up production soon.

"It is on my mind every single day," she said, adding, "I'm just disappointed with the entire system."