Cap on migrant worker visas takes toll on area businesses

Abbeville — A shortage of workers to process and package seafood could soon start to affect what’s on area tables this year. And in south Louisiana, where they say the four seasons are crawfish, crab, shrimp and oyster, everyone from fishermen to restaurant owners has cause for concern.

Right now in Acadiana, several seafood processing plants sit empty and dark, with no one to pick crabs, package shrimp or peel crawfish.

That’s because the federal government’s cap of 60,000 seasonal unskilled workers from foreign countries has been met early this year, and no more workers who come from other countries will be allowed into the United States until next year unless Congress changes the law.

Businesses can bring in the foreign workers only after they’ve proven there are no domestic workers to take the jobs. They must apply for a special work visa — or H2B — for each worker. In Louisiana alone, businesses applied for a total of 9,990 migrant workers for 2006, according to the state Department of Labor. Most of Louisiana’s H2B workers come from Mexico.

“These are low-income, temporary, stinky, yucky, nasty jobs that these people come and do,” said Kelly Couch, who helps businesses from around Lafayette, Baton Rouge and Lake Charles file the paperwork to get worker visas. “You can’t find people in Louisiana to do that.”

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Migrant

It's tough to find people anywhere in the country to do the jobs that workers do in construction, cleaning hotel rooms and working in restaurant kitchens. Many are in California's San Joaquin Valley, Arizona and New Mexico, but Dorsey says the demand for workers is high everywhere. Dorsey says he has no idea how many workers are in his area, but he estimates that it could be anywhere from 100,000 to 150,000.

The problem is that the workers are often more interested in their own country than they are in the U.S. For example, Dorsey says that when he offered a worker a job in California, the worker turned him down because he didn't want to leave his family in Mexico.

Dorsey says he is working to try to get the workers to stay in the U.S. by providing incentives such as housing, transportation, and health care. He also says he is trying to educate the workers about the benefits of staying in the U.S. and the dangers of returning to their home country.

He says that he has been in contact with several organizations that are working to help workers in the U.S., and he has been able to get some funding for his efforts.

Dorsey says he is optimistic about the future of his business and the workers he employs. He says he hopes to continue to grow his business and provide more jobs for workers in the U.S.