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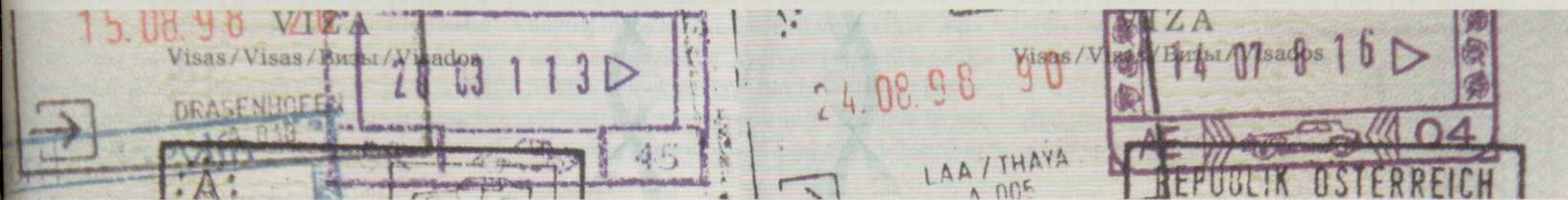
# B OR NOT H-2B?

THE SLINGS AND  
ARROWS OF  
GUEST-WORKER  
PROGRAMS CAN  
BE WORTH IT

**F**inding workers to fill important but low-skilled golf course maintenance positions is a problem, especially in remote areas and where other seasonal industries compete for workers in a limited labor pool. This problem will escalate as the U.S. population ages, birth rates decline and unemployment remains low.

The H-2B guest-worker program was established to provide relief for U.S. businesses that meet the qualifying criteria as stated by the U.S. Department of Labor: "The job and the employer's need must be one time, seasonal, peak load or intermittent; the job must be for less than one year; and there must be no qualified and willing U.S. workers available for the job."

Current legislation limits the number of guest workers permitted within the H-2B program to 66,000. A temporary provision exempts workers who are working in the





The Island in Plaquemine, La., provides housing for the guest workers it hires through the H-2B program. Photo: The Island

program already from counting toward that 66,000 cap. Immigration reform legislation is under consideration by Congress again, and the temporary, seasonal work force is part of the overall picture. Thus, labor and immigration are two of the GCSAA's priority issues.

"GCSAA belongs to the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, joining with other association and industry groups to work with Congress to establish sensible comprehensive legislation that does no harm to U.S. workers, yet meets the work force needs of business while protecting our national security," says Carrie Riordan, director of information and public policy.

Although golf facilities throughout the U.S. use the H-2B program, the GCSAA doesn't know how many are using it or the locations of those courses. Information about the H-2B program is available in the members-only section of the association's Web site ([www.gcsaa.org](http://www.gcsaa.org)) addressing issues such as who's eligible, cost ranges and employer responsibilities.

Detailed information is available from the U.S. Department of Labor – Employment & Training Administration and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. A facility could undertake the H-2B process itself, but a quick review of the governmental Web sites explains why so many service providers offer assistance to those considering participating in the program.

It's a detailed process. The timing of properly filed paperwork is essential to requesting work-

ers. The suppliers provide advance notice of all the deadlines; the paperwork to be filled out, often with the details filled in and the places to sign marked; and the notification of what the employer is required to do once the workers are on site. The fees vary, based on the range of services provided.

#### CHOOSE WHAT TO USE

The first step is exploring the options. David McCallum, director of agronomy for The Island in Plaquemine, La., has used the H-2B program for five years. He started with a supplier in Texas but now is working with a local firm.

"The H-2B services can be handled effectively by phone, e-mail, fax and FedEx, so local sourcing isn't necessary," McCallum says. "I like the easy access and the advantage of using the same company for translation services. They've translated our entire employee manual into Spanish and conducted on-site seminars about policies and procedures for us."

Like most golf course superintendents using a service provider for H-2B, McCallum relied on the company to recruit the workers for the first year of the program. Six workers from the same area of Mexico were brought in.

"We wanted nine for the second year," he says. "We brought five back and asked their input about additional workers, understanding they would recommend relatives, as well as others, but all would have the same great work ethic. We provided those names and addresses to the sup-

plier to use on our application. We've followed the same procedure for recruiting since then."

The Island has brought in as many as 18 guest workers. The company name is listed on the workers' visas, and McCallum is listed as the supervisor.

"That limits their work to our facilities," McCallum says. "All paperwork identifies us as the employer and flows in and out of our offices. Our supplier is an agent for us, alerting us to due dates, assisting us with filling out the paperwork and overseeing all details for government compliance.

In 2007, The Island received 14 workers through the program, 12 working directly for McCallum on the course and two assigned part of the time to the golf shop working on carts and the driving range.

"We requested and got the full 10 months the visa allows," he says. "Though we're not promised a specific arrival date – a week or so is allowed for travel – our crew began arriving on February 15 and can stay through December 15."

Paul Hallock, golf course superintendent at RedTail Mountain Club in Mountain City, Tenn., is using H-2B for the second year, working through an agency based in Colorado. He has selected a program offering similar procurement services to those used by The Island.

"We brought in nine workers last year, and are getting 19 this year with contact information for the additional workers supplied by the crewmembers," Hallock says. "They arrive in

early April and go back in mid-November, which fits well with our course's seasonal cycle. All the workers are under my administration. Ten work on the course, and nine work in construction on our clubhouse and housing development."

Under this type of program, the facility is responsible for taking the guest workers to the local social security office to file an application shortly after they arrive. The card will be sent to the worker at the specified address. The process takes about four to five weeks. There's a more intense background check now than before Sept. 11, but there are no concerns about false cards, McCallum says.

McCallum also takes the guest workers to the department of motor vehicles so they can test for a driver's license that's only good for their time in the U.S. So far, none of the workers have tested for a license. In some states, including Louisiana, they can get a photo ID through the DMV, which is easier to use locally than carrying a passport, visa and other supporting documents.

"Last year, our lead worker spoke English very well and basically served as a foreman for the group," Hallock says. "If he wants to test for a driver's license this year, we'll be supportive, but won't be able to supply him with a vehicle because of liability issues. The costs to him might not be worth the benefits."

Housing and transportation might be the responsibility of the employing facility, depending on the arrangement with the service provider.

"We provide housing about one mile from our maintenance facility," Hallock says. "We provide transportation for work, weekly trips to the supermarket and twice a month to Wal-Mart."

McCallum's course also provides housing.

"We're surrounded by farmland, so off-site housing isn't available," he says. "Our course is privately owned. The owner holds property adjacent to the course that has a 5,000-square-foot block building that had been leased by another business. Prior to last year, we kept two fully equipped trailers parked on that property to house all our guest workers. When that building became available, we invested \$175,000 converting it to a first-class, guest-worker housing facility in compliance with applicable commercial housing regulations and codes. Our crew members watched it being built and moved in shortly before their 2006 stint ended. It makes a huge statement, confirming our respect for them and what their work contributes to our



## In addition to H-2B

**There are programs in addition to H-2B that bring foreign workers to U.S. golf courses. One of these, the J-1 visa, can be coordinated through some universities with turf programs to provide internships for foreign students. For example, according to The Ohio State University Buckeye Turf Web site (<http://buckeyeturf.osu.edu>), Mike O'Keeffe and Mike Chrisman have more than 100 J-1 visa students interning. Penn State offers a similar program coordinated through its turfgrass department.**

**Bruce Williams, CGCS, of The Los Angeles Country Club, has used this program and in 2006 brought in workers from Poland and Russia.**

"They were great employees, already had their Visas, wanted to work as much as possible, and would do any job on the course or anywhere else on the property," Williams says. "Our course is multicultural. We probably have 25 different countries represented in our overall work force. We find these individuals are quick to pick up on American English, building on the base they've learned in school."

**Sometimes workers find you. In 2005, that's what happened to Paul Hallock, golf course superintendent at RedTail Mountain Club in Mountain City, Tenn., at the golf course he worked at previously in New Hampshire.**

"I'd placed an ad in the local paper, and a company working with guest-worker programs contacted me," Hallock says. "We brought in two students from Latvia. The company and the students managed the paperwork, supplying all the necessary documents. I signed an agreement noting that as long as they were dependable workers putting in a good effort, we would keep them employed. They came in April and worked through August, taking only one weekend off. They found their own housing and provided their own transportation. Both spoke English very well. They'd have worked 65 to 70 hours every week had I allowed it. They told me they were making four times more than they could have earned back home."

**A local newspaper ad also worked for Jeff Whitmire, CGCS, at Williamsburg (Va.) Country Club. Two third-year college students from Romania wanted to come to the area and found an online posting of a local newspaper ad. They worked out the details of the J-1 visa program sponsored by the Council of International Educational Exchange through online interaction with Work and Travel USA.**

"I was dubious at first, but they prepared and filed all of the paperwork, found their own housing and rode bikes the seven miles to and from work," Whitmire says. "They worked from June 29 through September 29, the maximum three-month period allowed by the program. They were exceptional - hard workers, curious and smart, willing to take on any assignment and put in long hours, and their English was excellent. Their standard of living in Romania was fairly high, yet they were able to double their pay working here. We've kept in touch by e-mail and I've invited them back, but they want to explore other adventures."

**Because Whitmire learned that many of the area's seasonal tourist attractions use the J-1 program, he has hired Asian students from April until June and Eastern European students for the last part of the season.**

**Despite the influx of foreign workers, labor is a huge issue with more than 4,000 jobs unfilled in the Williamsburg area in 2006. With numbers like these spreading throughout the U.S., more golf courses might be exploring guest worker options. GCI**

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golf course.”

Kris Davis, CGCS, at The Clubs of Cordillera Ranch in Boerne, Texas, is in the second year of working with a labor contractor that uses the H-2B program, which basically outsources the crew personnel needs. Davis can request specific individuals through his own recruiting with current workers.

“The supplier handles all the details and files everything with the proper governmental agencies,” he says. “We have no paperwork to sign off on. We pay the contractor a flat rate per worker per hour. The company then pays the individuals. The supplier provides their transportation and housing. I pay a \$20 weekly stipend per worker toward the housing costs. This program has worked very well for us.”

#### FACING CHALLENGES

Despite all the benefits of the H-2B guest worker program, there can be a lot of paperwork involved. To start with, there's turnover in guest

worker personnel, so most courses will bring in some new workers each year.

“I could do the paperwork and probably save a little on the \$5,500 we're paying our supplier, but there's so much documentation and involvement with the legal system, one snag could require hours to resolve,” Hallock says. “We feel the costs are worth the services.”

If superintendents are going to use the program, they need to start early. Timetables for filing the application and upfront fees keep moving forward as more businesses vie for H-2B workers. The application and fees are due in mid-summer, ranging from early July into August of the previous year. The date depends on the workers' potential arrival time. This step takes four to five months to process.

Superintendents also need to advertise for workers in the local newspaper and document that advertising and any responses to it to back up the need and request for guest workers.

Government requirements can change at any

time and on any part of the process. For example, in 2006, facilities were required to provide payroll records for the two previous years for a specific period showing the difference in payroll figures with and without the H-2B workers to further prove the seasonality of the work force.

“My main complaint is the time restriction,” Davis says. “We're in play year-round. If anything, the golfers' expectations are higher during the cooler season when guest workers aren't available to us.”

Language is an issue, too, but not a big one. Davis and his assistant speak “golf course Spanish,” which works in job-related areas. His three year-round, bilingual Hispanic crewmembers who are U.S. citizens serve as translators if needed. Hallock and his two assistants speak limited Spanish. They took a Spanish class last winter to improve. The workers appreciate that and take it as a sign of respect.

Many guest workers brought into the country are dependable, quick to learn and deliver what's wanted, and eager to work as many hours as facilities could give them, including weekends and holidays. Those results can be worth any of the red tape involved. **GCI**

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Some guest workers that come to the U.S. through the H-2B program refer employers to their friends and relatives for future work.

Photo: Dreamstime.com

