

Government Relations Report

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This has been a very exciting year in government relations! Increased interest in pesticide usage, taxes for landscaping, and the controversy over immigrant workers have kept the Mid Atlantic BOD very busy this year.

We had the honor to address a delegation from the Maryland State Senate about pesticide usage earlier this year. There was a bill proposed (SB 499) in the Maryland Senate aimed at construction on property currently used or previously used as golf courses. This bill would have entailed property owners to incur extremely expensive soil testing, with the results being reviewed by an appointed board whose membership may not be favorable to any development. The delegation asked about current pest control programs, and how golf courses can affect the environment with our chemical applications. We were able to answer very positively, and the bill still hasn't been passed in the State Senate.

There was a small push by the Maryland State Senate to apply a "pesticide tax" on landscaping companies. This tax would force landscaping companies to charge additional monies for each pesticide application. The taxes collected would then be used for environmental programs. Though there is definitely a need for a funding increase for our state environmental programs, the landscaping industry is extremely competitive, and a tax on their services would hurt the small business owner. This tax was overturned, with special effort by Mark Schlossberg and his constituents.

The largest challenge to hit our industry has been the H-2B worker controversy. H-2B workers are used in the golf, hospitality, seafood and agriculture industries across the nation. These workers have been unfairly lumped into the "immigration" issue. The H-2B worker is NOT an immigrant! These are people with work visas, who are allowed to come into the country to work seasonal jobs, and then MUST return to their home country. They are not allowed to stay, and cannot bring any family with them. Because they go through the federal government, they pay taxes accurately, without claiming unreasonable numbers of questionable dependents. They leave behind Social Security, which benefits the American worker as our Social Security shrinks.

They are vital for our industry, allowing us to keep full-time workers on staff, and filling the voids when it is hard to find temporary or seasonal employees. Let's face it, most Americans want a year round job, and they can get it. Americans are not willing to work only 7 or 8 months each year. The H-2B workers are paid a fair labor wage, and are allowed to return the following year, if they follow the rules for coming and going set out by the government.

The H-2B program allows 66,000 new visas each year. This is a perfect way for the federal government to send illegal immigrants home, without hurting the small business owners who depend on unskilled labor to meet production. Unfortunately, the senators and representatives of congress do not want to touch any issue dealing with "immigration" with a 10 foot pole. Save Small Business (savesmallbusiness.org) brought over 700 small business owners and spokespeople to congress in December to push Congress into voting for the bills to support the H-2B program (Senate bill 988 and House of Representatives bill 1843). Our group from Maryland (about 15 people) visited various senate and house offices to push our members to support these bills. Rep. Ruppberger (Maryland District 2) was extremely supportive of our issue, and agreed to help move it forward as best he could by talking to the unsupportive members of the House. Rep. Hoyer's staff (Maryland District 5) stressed how they could not help with this issue, because of the number of their constituents who had misconceptions about the program, and that any stance on what could be seen as an "immigration issue" could cost them re-election in the future. Several senators such as Sen. Webb from Virginia and Sen. Burr from North Carolina also agreed to support the H-2B program.

In the end, due to the misconception that the H-2B program is an immigration issue instead of a small business issue, the bill failed to pass in December. We will continue to support the H-2B program which provides new visas for legal workers to come temporarily into the US and fill seasonal positions. Please contact your Senators and Representatives, and let them know how important an issue it is for our industry to have legal, authorized workers here to keep our full time workers employed.