

# Portland Press Herald

## **Our View: President Biden should end ban on worker visas**

After a year of disruption and uncertainty, Maine businesses don't need any more.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

19 COMMENTS

With the vaccination program moving quickly here and [across the country](#), and Gov. Janet Mills' [recent decision](#) to loosen restrictions on business capacity and out-of-state visitors, Maine's tourism industry is ready for a bounce-back year following a season decimated by the novel coronavirus.

But after this most unique of years, the industry is also facing something very familiar – a shortage of seasonal workers.

So many people have worked so hard to get to this point, it would be a shame if the potential for a great summer, much needed after 2020, was lost because too many business owners couldn't fill positions. To avoid such a disappointment, President Biden [should lift the cap](#) imposed on a series of foreign-worker visas. The Trump administration banned seasonal, employer-sponsored and cultural exchange visas, halting the processing of visa applications last June. If nothing is done, the program will expire March 31 and the applications will be tossed.

The ban was aimed at prioritizing the hiring of American workers during the pandemic, when unemployment rose.

But as a group of U.S. senators, including Maine's Angus King, [recently pointed out](#), many affected industries are still having trouble finding workers. Unemployment remains low in some sectors, including information technology. Companies that use H-1B visas, which bring a lot of IT workers into the country, aren't having anymore luck finding enough qualified workers stateside now than they were before COVID hit. For these businesses, it's holding back growth.

In Maine, too, the problems addressed by visas remain the same. Businesses use the seasonal H-2B visa program to fill the slots necessary to cover the tourism season. Small towns like Ogunquit Bar Harbor swell in population as tourist and summer residents arrive, and they don't have nearly enough people to fill the jobs – this year or any other.

In February, the executive director of the Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce [told the Ellsworth American](#) that the lack of visas would pit small businesses against big ones in a race for scarce workers.

“This the piece that bothers me: Will we have the staffing?” she said.

The chance that additional visas will hurt workers is low. To get a visa, not only do businesses have to vet workers, they also have to prove they cannot hire U.S. workers for the position, and they can't pay foreign workers lower wages.

In fact, the lack of visas is more likely to hurt local workers. It certainly hurts the businesses who can't expand or otherwise fully take advantage of the summer season, and who may have to cut hours or close altogether.

And withholding H-1B visas only makes it more likely that some IT positions will be moved overseas.

Overall, the lack of foreign-worker visas raising the level of uncertainty for businesses, workers and their families. It disrupts relationships that have brought workers here for years.

President Biden should reinstate these worker visas. After a year of uncertainty and disruptions, Maine businesses don't need any more.