

Congressman Charlie Melancon  
Testimony before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees,  
Border Security and International Law  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Oversight Hearing on the H-2B Program  
April 16, 2008

Thank you, Congresswoman Lofgren, for holding this hearing today.

Like many Members of Congress, I have been in contact with business owners in my district about extending the H-2B returning worker exemption for well over a year. However, since crawfish and shrimp harvesting seasons are upon us, the calls from my district have reached a fevered pitch. Their message is simple: without the H-2B workforce that they've relied on for the last two years, they will be forced to reduce services or, worse, close their doors.

According to one industry report, businesses in south Louisiana employed 1,968 H-2B workers last year, almost 600 in my district alone. These businesses employ about 13,000 American workers. Without H-2B workers to work along side our homegrown workforce, these businesses stand to suffer. Businesses that close their doors will undoubtedly lay off American-born workers.

The effect of reduced services, particularly in the crawfish and shrimp industries, will ripple throughout the south Louisiana economy. Take crawfish, for example: if crawfish processors reduce their production, they buy fewer crawfish, so farmers cannot empty their ponds. When these ponds become overcrowded, the crawfish stop growing. It is a cycle that has turned and turned and turned for as long as I've been on this earth. It's not just part of the culture in south Louisiana it's a way of life for many hard working families. Without immediate action, we're about to see this cycle come to a screeching halt.

This dilemma is by no means unique to the Deep South. I know my colleagues from Maryland have heard from their constituents in the crab industry and my friends out west have heard from their winter sports companies. We have a serious labor problem in this country. Fixing it will take years. We ought to have that debate, but let's not shun a short term patch that will save thousands of businesses and countless American jobs.

I recognize there are problems with the H-2B visa program. I encourage the Committee to address these flaws and I will work collaboratively to fix them. However, as we move toward reform, I urge this Committee to consider a short-term H-2B worker exemption extension.

Thank you for allowing me to testify. I would also like to include a spreadsheet of H-2B data provided by the shrimp and crawfish industries in my testimony.