

J-1 Visa Program Faces Scrutiny

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The U.S. State Department program that allows foreign college students to come to America and work for the summer is in danger of going away suddenly, leaving seafood processing operations in Kodiak and elsewhere around Alaska in a lurch.

The J-1 Visa, as it's called, allows college students to spend four months in America on work study programs. In Alaska, the students overwhelmingly work at processors during the summer salmon season.

Alaska Senator Mark Begich has appealed to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton - who herself worked at an Alaska fish plant in her youth - asking her to exempt the state from the J-1 shutdown.

-- (J1 Visa 1 26 sec "We've made a strong letter ... and they make some money.")

The value of the J-1 Visa program was called into question last year after hundreds of J-1 workers staged a big protest when they walked out of a Hershey candy packing plant in Pennsylvania, complaining about mandatory overtime. As a result, the Department of State now wants to bar J-1's from all manufacturing and packing plants, which, unfortunately for Alaska include seafood processing facilities.

United Fishermen of Alaska Executive Director Mark Vinsel said the fish won't wait around for the issues to be resolved:

-- (J1 Visa 2 30 sec "Commercial fishermen are pretty ... Alaska jobs are at stake.")

Begich

says the State Department is using a bureaucratic maneuver called an "interim final rule" which takes place almost immediately, with only a 30-day review, but without public comment. Since processors and their agents are currently recruiting for this summer's salmon season, Begich says the issue needs to be resolved soon:

-- (J1 Visa 3 27
sec "Timing is everything. ...
push the envelope pretty hard.")

Up

to 5,000 foreign students - many from Eastern Europe - work in Alaska fish plants each summer. Processors would have to scramble to replace them on such short notice.