

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. VISA-PROCESSING GLITCH IS PARTIALLY FIXED

Some Mexican farm workers hired by California growers still waiting at border

By Miriam Jordan
June 24, 2015

A computer problem that crippled U.S. visa processing around the globe for two weeks has been partially solved, the government said Wednesday, but more than 1,000 farm workers remain parked at the U.S.-Mexico border waiting for visas as crops wither.

State Department spokeswoman Ashley Garrigus said about 50 consular posts world-wide "are now online and issuing visas." At least 45,000 visas were issued by Wednesday, including 15,000 in Beijing.

The State Department said 1,750 seasonal agricultural workers who had been stuck at the border have been issued visas. But many are still awaiting them, according to immigration attorneys and agents representing farmers.

Steve Scaroni, a labor agent who brings in seasonal workers for large California growers, said 200 had arrived. Another 800 were still at the border Wednesday, waiting for H-2A agricultural visas that are issued by U.S. consular authorities there in time for the harvest.

"This has become a multimillion-dollar loss," said Mr. Scaroni. "The biggest problem is in strawberries, and we are going to have problems coming up with garlic."

Rick Alexander, an agent who helps vegetable and tobacco farmers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio and Indiana secure visas, said that about half the expected workers had arrived.

The computer glitch, which began June 9, affected the flow of applicants' biometric information, such as fingerprints, to a central database. Biometric data is used for security screening of applicants.

"The database responsible for handling biometric clearances has been rebuilt and is being tested," Ms. Garrigus said.

Thousands of people who planned to travel to the U.S. for business and leisure also were affected.

In Brazil, U.S. consular authorities said that the country's four posts had made "some progress. However, they are not completely operational."

James Jarrell of Las Vegas said that he and his Brazilian fiancée were told that her passport would be ready for pickup within 10 days of their interview in Rio de Janeiro on June 2, when a U.S. official approved a visa.

"The State Department says the problem is fixed, but we don't know when she'll get her passport," he said. "She is there with no clothes, because I brought everything of hers with me."

Mr. Jarrell, who has already paid \$500 to change her travel date once, will have to incur another \$500 penalty to change it again, he said.

World-wide, U.S. posts issuing visas handle 50,000 applications a day. In the 2014 fiscal year, the State Department's 235 posts issued 9.9 million nonimmigrant visas, including those for workers and tourists. It issued another 467,370 permanent or immigrant visas.