

# Chihuahua filling Basin's oilfield vacancies

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West Texas is a hard sell to many Americans who could fill its manifold job openings, but it is "Nirvana" to people in the Mexican state of Chihuahua who seek temporary work visas.

A dozen political and economic leaders from the cities of Aldama, Ojinaga and Coyame visited Midland recently and said their 20 citizens who were finishing 10-month visas at Big Dog Drilling the next week hoped to return when 75 come in February to Big Dog and Endeavor Energy.

"They are able to save a lot of money and they have been working freely and not hiding from anybody," said Ciudad Aldama Mayor Jesus Jose Ruiz Fernandez.

Ciudad Ojinaga Mayor Jorge Montoya Lujan said the program "is a win-win situation because we can supply the need you have."

Speaking through Midlander Fernando de la Rosa, who represents Chihuahua in the U.S., the mayors said they plan to send more than 2,000 for the Permian Basin's oil and gas, construction and restaurant industries in early 2008, including women to work at a Fort Stockton dairy.

Ciudad Coyame Mayor Luis Morales Fong said workforce officials like Ingeniero Isidro Olivas of Ojinaga run intensive three-month training programs for mechanics and welders.

The officials said their applicants must have some acquaintance with English, and drug users and those with criminal records are not sent because they are in effect ambassadors. Aldama and Ojinaga each has about 20,000 citizens and Coyame 5,000.

Just having met with the Big Dog rig hands, the mayors said their men "were very happy" with the experience and eager to work as much overtime as possible. "It depends on them and they gave 150 percent," said Ruiz Fernandez.

Isidro Olivas said there is great logic in connecting Chihuahua and the Basin because 90 percent of the 70,000 to 80,000 Hispanics who live here have Chihuahuan relatives.

Importing foreigners to fill otherwise unfillable jobs is a complex process requiring expert help, said Endeavor Energy Risk Manager Alicia Harris, who previously worked in immigration for the French oil and gas company Perenco.

Guided by the Austin law firm of Tindall & Foster, Endeavor recruiters have met applicants for two years in the cities of Chihuahua, Juarez, Ojinaga and Aldama in preparation for getting 30 of the next wave's 75 employees.

"We need hands for workover rigs and drilling rigs," Harris said on Wednesday. "Everything worked out wonderfully for Big Dog. They were extremely pleased with the men's performance and ability to learn."

Tindall & Foster's Andrew Thorley said the plan is limited only by the annual 66,000 worker ceiling of the U.S. Labor Department's H-2B visa program. "It's not exclusive to Texas and we do plenty of it because a lot of employers would like to have the type of labor that is just not available when the economy is good," he said.

"These guys qualify because they show home country ties to go back to after they come here. Following the hurricanes, there was a need for oil infrastructure rebuilding on the Gulf Coast. Those are better paying jobs, so workers in the oil patch have some options.

"The process is not real simple," said Thorley, explaining studies are done to show the visitors will not take jobs Americans want and each one is reviewed by the Texas Workforce Commission, Labor Department, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and Department of Homeland Security.

They get health care insurance but do not earn Social Security benefits or become eligible for citizenship. Neither do children born to women guest workers become U.S. citizens.

Thorley said the Labor Department's H-1B program lets 65,000 into the country each year, but it's only for those with college degrees who work in specialty occupations. H-2B requires three to four months of paperwork, but H-1B takes six months with those applying in April and gaining admittance in October.

"I wish the H-2B cap were a little higher," the lawyer said. "We're very much in favor of immigration reform. Especially when the economy is good, we're somewhat curtailed by the caps."

He said guest workers are also needed for the nation's health care, landscaping, lumber, manufacturing, resort and hospitality services and food service and processing industries.