

Inmates as crab pickers?

Neither moving prisoners nor shipping seafood makes sense

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Seafood packers warned that if the guest immigrant workers they have come to rely on to pick crabs were not available this summer, they would be in trouble. With H2B visas unavailable this year, thanks to inaction on the part of Congress, the situation has become so dire, seafood packers are considering contracting with the Maryland prison system to hire inmates on work-release to pick crabs. Prison system officials have approached the crab processors with the idea of making women prisoners available from Jessup and the prerelease unit in Baltimore; crab picking is traditionally women's work.

The processors have said all along that local women who once did this work on a seasonal basis have found better work opportunities elsewhere, while few men are interested. The hours are long, the work is hot, difficult and exhausting, and the rewards are scant -- minimum wage for a job that disappears when the crabbing season ends.

Although Maryland law would allow such an arrangement to exist, the details that would need to be worked out are overwhelming. Logistics alone are formidable --transporting inmates 2 1/2 hours each way on a daily basis for a work-release assignment is insane; the alternative --shipping crabs to Central Maryland to be processed --raises other issues.

Safety and quality control are key in this discussion, regardless of where the crabs get picked.

The process requires the use of sharp objects, which are not normally made available to inmates. Questions might legitimately be raised about how much these inmates can be trusted to work daily with sharp objects without giving in to the temptation to stash a knife and take it back to prison --or resist the urge to have an altercation while on the job. Either way, it could be a disaster. How would they be supervised both on the job and in transit?

As for quality control, would inmates learn and reliably practice safe food handling techniques while picking the crab meat? And some people have raised the idea of screening inmates for HIV and other infectious diseases.

Crabbing season is upon us; hiring and transporting inmates across the state on a daily basis may not be the smartest solution to this dilemma. Packers might be better off to consider making this work more attractive to the existing local workforce by improving pay and/or working conditions.