

Bills to address Canadians working in Maine woods

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AUGUSTA — Lawmakers will delve into the recurring cross-border tensions over use of Canadian loggers in the Maine woods this week when they consider two bills that would stiffen the penalties for outfits that violate foreign labor laws.

The use of Canadian workers by Maine landowners and contractors has been a source of friction in the industry for

decades. While landowners and forest managers insist Canadian laborers are needed to cover a shortfall of American workers in some areas, Maine loggers contend money and an "old boy's network" are the true reasons.

The most recent, high-profile spike in tensions occurred last summer when many loggers throughout northern Maine found themselves unemployed due to slumping demand for wood amid the recession. Frustrated loggers claimed that they

were turned away or shut out of jobs eventually filled by Canadian workers and that companies were routinely flouting other state laws meant to maintain an even playing field.

The issue culminated in July when the Maine Department of Labor asked federal regulators to investigate what the state said were "pervasive and industry-wide" violations of the laws ensuring that American workers have first dibs on U.S. jobs.

Federal labor officials eventu-

ally suspended two firms from the program allowing companies to hire temporary foreign workers. The state continues to investigate complaints against other firms.

On Thursday, the Legislature's Labor Committee will consider two bills sponsored by northern Maine lawmakers that aim to put extra teeth into state laws on foreign workers. The bills will encounter stiff opposition from forest industry representatives, who insist the changes are unnecessary and

could disrupt wood flow to mills.

"We just see it as pretty destructive so we are not in favor of either of these bills," said Patrick Strauch, executive director of the Maine Forest Products Council.

The first bill, LD 1545, would significantly increase the fines for companies that violate the state's laws. It also would change the rules governing who supplies the heavy equipment used by foreign loggers.

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The sponsor, Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, is a logger who has led the push to get state and federal authorities to crack down on violations. He is also co-chairman of the Labor Committee.

Jackson rankled some landowners and forest management companies when he led several unofficial scouting expeditions into the woods to check on logging crews.

"We still can't get into areas of the state that are dominated by Canadians," he said Sunday.

The second and potentially more controversial bill, LD 1552, would bar landowners from taking advantage of the state's Tree Growth Tax Law if they employ foreign or so-called "bonded" loggers on the

site. The tree growth law offers landowners tax incentives for managing the land for timber production.

The bill is sponsored by Rep. John Martin, an Eagle Lake Democrat who has worked closely with Jackson on the issue of foreign loggers. Martin was also an architect of the original Tree Growth Tax Law.

Strauch, whose organization represents most of the state's large timberland owners, said he believes the real intent of both bills is to end the use of Canadian loggers altogether.

"We think that is certainly the message of the sponsors of the bills, or at least that is the language of the bills," Strauch said. "And that's not realistic. For centuries, we have relied on Canadian workers who, in many cases, are the closest to the job sites."

That is a key point of con-

tention in the debate over foreign loggers in Maine.

Landowners and forest industry representatives insist Canadian crews are necessary because they cannot find Maine loggers willing to work in many of the most remote locations. In some cases, workers at the site stay in logging camps during the workweek.

"We would love to have more American people interested in being loggers and working in these remote areas," Strauch said. "But historically, it has taken a combination of mostly American and some Canadian loggers to keep the wood flowing to mills, he said.

According to Strauch, only

about 140 bonded foreign loggers were hired in Maine last season out of a pool of roughly 2,500 loggers in the state. Those figures could not be verified by the Maine Department of Labor.

But Jackson said those arguments, which have been made for decades, just don't hold up.

"There isn't anywhere in the state where people aren't willing to work if you are willing to pay them," he said.

Public hearings on the two bills are scheduled for 1 p.m. Thursday in the Labor Committee Room of the Cross Office Building.

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