

Legislature passes bill to help create jobs for loggers

Landowners not eligible to receive tax break for hiring Canadians

BY KEVIN MILLER
OF THE NEWS STAFF

AUGUSTA — A controversial bill that would prohibit timberland owners who hire Canadian loggers from participating in a special tax break program was passed by the Legislature on Friday.

The bill, LD 1552, states that landowners who allow the use of foreign "bonded" laborers in their timber harvesting operations will be ineligible to receive the sizable tax breaks on that land offered through Maine's Tree Growth Tax program.

The bill, which was sparked by allegations that Maine loggers were losing jobs to Canadian crews, squeaked by the House on a 70-68 vote Friday after opponents raised concerns about effects on mills that depend on a steady supply of Maine wood. It passed on final enactment in the Senate by 19-13.

The measure now heads to Gov. John Baldacci's desk, where its fate is uncertain.

Baldacci spokesman David Farmer noted that the governor has worked to address abuses within the bonded labor program, including working with the U.S. Department of Labor on ongoing investigations. But the governor will have to review the amended bill for possible ramifications, Farmer said.

"The governor will make a decision once he has it," Farmer said.

Sponsored by Rep. John Martin of Eagle Lake, the bill is one of two measures that target landowners or logging contractors that hire Canadian crews. The other, sponsored by Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, would significantly increase penalties for companies that violate the labor laws governing the use of foreign workers.

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jacket the suspect was wearing at the KFC, Roy said.

more specific information about its location from a person who

probably had done more for her than anyone else. We told her we

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The federal "bonded labor" program allows companies to hire foreign workers on a temporary basis when not enough American workers are available. But first, companies are required to recruit U.S. workers for the job.

Martin and Jackson contend that some landowners and con-

tractors in northern Maine routinely ignore the recruitment requirements or make it extremely difficult for American workers to land a job. Defenders of the bonded labor program counter that some landowners have trouble finding Mainers willing to work in the more remote locations.

Critics also questioned the rationale of forcing landowners to withdraw from Tree Growth — thereby incurring significant financial penalties — when the federal bonded

labor program is perfectly legal.

"This is so unfair for the people in the [Tree Growth] program," said Rep. Linda Valentino, D-Saco. "I cannot believe this type of a bill can go forward."

Martin, who is author of the Tree Growth law, was unmoved by the arguments.

"Remember, it's a tax policy that we gave," he said after the narrow House vote. "Why would we give it to people who don't hire Maine workers?"

The bill encountered strong

opposition from landowners and mill owners, who predicted the measure could result in wood shortages and eventually layoffs at mills.

Patrick Strauch, executive director of the Maine Forest Products Industry, said he remains worried about how the bill will affect other Maine families connected to the industry.

"I'm hopeful and confident that the governor will get above the fray and have a much more constructive discussion," Strauch said.