

Logger bills panned at hearing

Canadian workers
in Maine at issue

BY KEVIN MILLER
OF THE NEWS STAFF

AUGUSTA — Landowners and logging contractors from northern Maine packed a public hearing Thursday to testify against a pair of controversial bills arising from long-standing tensions over the use of Canadian workers in the Maine woods.

Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, has sponsored legislation that would significantly increase the fines for violating laws intended to ensure that companies recruit Maine loggers before hiring Canadian crews.

The bill, LD 1545, also would bar companies that violate foreign

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labor laws from participating in the "bonded labor" program for five years and would impose additional restrictions on equipment ownership.

A second bill, LD 1552, sponsored by Democratic Rep. John Martin of Eagle Lake, would prohibit landowners from participating in Maine's Tree Growth program if they employ foreign loggers. The tree growth law offers landowners tax incentives for managing the land for timber production.

"Some people would say that is a heavy hammer, and I concede that it is," Martin said. "But the reason why this bill is here is that I can't think of any other way to get the attention of the people that own the land."

Judging by Thursday's gathering, Martin and Jackson succeeded in catching the attention — but not the support — of landowners and contractors.

Members of the Legislature's Labor Committee heard roughly two hours of testimony from business owners, land managers and industry representatives who predicted the two measures would harm Maine's forest products sector.

Peter Triandafilou, vice president of Huber Resources Corp., which manages roughly 400,000 acres in Maine, said the vast majority of loggers employed by his company are American. But the company needs a small percentage of Canadian loggers to work in areas too remote to attract Maine workers.

"I don't blame them. I would want to be home at night, too," Triandafilou said. "But I don't think I should be punished if I can't find people to work in those remote areas."

Claire Theriault, who runs Northern Timber Trucking out of Fort Kent, said seven of her company's 24 drivers are Canadian.

Theriault said she works hard to fill those positions with Maine residents. But she said applicants are often too young for insurance purposes, too inexperienced, have operating under the influence convictions or cannot pass through customs to haul to Canadian mills.

She gave an example of a forklift operator who applied recently

through the state's job bank.

"I can't put him in my truck," Theriault said. "I've got a \$105,000 truck with a trailer. If he turns that over, where am I? I have a contract with these people to haul so much wood, and if I can't get that [done], do you think I'm going to have a job next year?"

Jim Contino, fiber supply manager for Verso Paper, said wood prices skyrocketed in 2008 during a temporary halt in the bonded labor program. As a result, Verso ended up buying wood from as far away as Pennsylvania and Virginia to keep the mill running.

"Like it or not, our forest products industry is fully integrated with Canada," Contino said. "So introducing bills like [Jackson's and Martin's] is destructive to our industry and is a bit like poking our Canadian neighbors in the eye."

Several speakers blamed the current tensions over bonded laborers on the recession, which has driven down demand for wood. But Jackson and Martin said state and federal regulators have been lax in enforcing the labor laws for years.

Last year, the Maine Department of Labor asked federal regulators to investigate what the state said were "pervasive and industrywide" violations of the laws ensuring that Ameri-

can workers have first dibs on U.S. jobs.

Federal labor officials eventually suspended two firms from the program that allows companies to hire temporary foreign workers. State and federal labor officials continue to investigate complaints against other firms.

Martin and Jackson said they discouraged northern Maine woods workers from testifying in Augusta on Thursday, largely out of fear of retribution from potential employers. A representative from the Maine Department of Labor testified in support of Jackson's bill to stiffen penalties for violations.

But Jackson presented committee members with a packet of newspaper clips dating back to the 1970s focusing on the same cross-border tensions over Canadian loggers in Maine. He dismissed statements that Maine loggers are not willing to work in remote areas, pointing out that for three years he commuted five hours every week from Allagash to a job site.

"These two bills are in response to issues that have been going on in the northern Maine woods for longer than I have been alive," Jackson said.