

Loggers attack federal study of forest industry in Maine

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PRESQUE ISLE — The methods, analysis and summary of a report on Maine's logging industry were chopped down Tuesday by supporters of loggers seeking to end a federal program that allows Canadians to work in the Maine woods.

Project leaders, however, were steadfast in defending their meth-

ods and analysis of information garnered during the more than six-month-long, \$100,000 study funded by the federal Department of Labor.

The report, prepared by Pan Atlantic Consultants of Portland, came under attack during a seven-hour meeting held by the Maine Department of Labor at the County View Convention Center at Presque Isle. Visible by

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their absence from the session were logging contractors and landowners. None of the several landowners and contractors in attendance at previous meetings were at Tuesday's session.

After nearly three hours of discussion about the report, the loggers whose blockades of private woods roads along the Quebec-Maine border in November 1998 started the first examination of the industry in 20 years, still believed the study was skewed.

After 18 months of meetings and the development of the study, federal and state labor officials, loggers, and a contractor spokesman decided Tuesday to create further subcommittees to look at issues of setting heavy equipment rates, possible regulation changes, the difference in wage rates in the woods in the St. John Valley area of northern Maine, and possible legislative changes.

"Loggers were visibly not satisfied because their goal of removing Canadian loggers from the Maine woods will not come about," Alan C. Hinsey, director of the Bureau of Labor Standards, said after the meeting. "We hope they will continue to be part of the meetings we will have."

Hilton Hafford of Allagash, one of the leaders of the 20-month-long logging protest, commented, "The Maine Department of Labor steered the study exactly where they wanted it to go. I didn't expect anything different."

The daylong session proved to be testy at times, and tempers flared once when logger Stacey Kelly of Fort Kent thought a union organizer said that Canadian loggers were better workers, at times working two jobs to be able to make a living.

At another point in the discussion on regulation changes to be sought, Kelly said, "These meetings were not started because we needed changes in regulations — they were started because we can't make a living in the northern Maine woods."

One part of the Pan Atlantic study generally accepted by those present acknowledged there is an imbalance of power in northern Maine because most of the land involved in the forest industry is in the hands of a few companies.

While there was agreement that the phenomenon affects wages in the northern Maine woods industry, the core group of loggers found no support among government officials for their belief that the presence of Canadians in the woods adversely affects the ability of the Maine loggers to earn a living.

Jennifer Senick, program leader, and Eric Bassett, manager of the study project, however, were the ones on the hot seat most of the day.

Both Pan Atlantic staffers said very little that was not questioned by either the logging leaders, other loggers, or a group of college students and members of the Forest Native Network in the audience of about 70 people.

Unlike the authors of the study, Mitch Lansky, a concerned environmental writer who has been involved in logging issues for decades, was never interrupted in his 30-minute look at the study, its methods and analysis.

Lansky was cheered and applauded when he said that the study was "flawed" because results were deduced from "small samplings of a complex work force," that the study "did not always compare apples to apples," and that some of the opinions in the study were questionable because those interviewed had a strong motivation to be dishonest.

He also said the study failed to look at a supposed "labor short-

age" in the Maine woods. If one exists, as the study maintains, Lansky asked, "why don't wages rise in the Maine woods as they do elsewhere when there is a shortage of labor?"

"There is only a shortage of American workers willing to work at the landowners' and contractors' offered prices," Lansky said. "If wages were high enough to make a decent living, Americans would return to the woods."

"Loggers are always asked to do more for less money," Lansky continued. "Loggers in the Maine woods should be making more money than burger flippers in Portland."

Loggers themselves said the study was skewed.

Troy Jackson of Allagash, one of the loggers' leaders, asked why he was not interviewed, despite personally contacting Pan Atlantic. Jackson said the only member of the protesting loggers who was interviewed was Haford.

Hinsey offered some hope with a legislatively formed forestry roundtable that will look at forestry issues, forestry practices, and labor issues to develop a report for the Legislature for the winter of 2001.

"This will move things into the legislative realm," Hinsey said. "This could bring about new laws or regulations for the forest industry."

Hinsey was not sure if the loggers would participate in further study groups. He said officials will seek their participation.

In one of the few positive notes heard Tuesday, Hinsey reported that the number of requested bonded Canadians for the upcoming logging season has dropped for the second year in a row.

In 1998, 670 bonds were requested by logging contractors.

In 1999, the number of bonds dropped to 482. The number requested by 41 contractors as of Monday was down to 376.

The largest decrease, about half of last year's number of 175, came in the category of all-around loggers, who use chain saws, have their own skidders and cut and haul trees. The number for other logger positions was fairly stable, showing, according to officials, a changeover to loggers in mechanized logging jobs.