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Loggers riled over LePage comments

Governor suggested Maine should hire more Canadians

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AUGUSTA — Gov. Paul LePage has riled some northern Maine loggers with comments he made during a town hall meeting Thursday in Presque Isle suggesting that Maine needs to hire more Canadian workers to cut down trees.

During a question-and-answer session with local residents, the governor was asked whether he would support any legislation that helps Maine's struggling logging industry.

"I am in big support of Maine loggers, but I've also gone around to Maine mills and I've asked them, 'Do you have enough logs?' LePage said, according to a video recording of the session.

The answer, the governor said, was, "No, we can't get them. We can't get the logs here."

The issue is not supply, according to LePage, whose claim is supported by a recent report commissioned by the state indicating that Maine could increase logging of softwood trees, such as spruce and fir, for at least the next 20 years.

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LePage

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The real issue, he said, is finding people to get the logs from the forests to the sawmills. He said in some areas of the state, there is no shortage of workers.

"But in other parts of the state you have to have [Canadians] because there's nobody that wants to cut the logs," the governor said.

That comment prompted some Maine logging industry representatives to suggest that the governor talk to the dozens of loggers throughout Aroostook County who are looking for work.

"It's typical of this governor to lodge another attack on Maine workers," said Troy Jackson, a logger and Democratic senator for District 35 in Aroostook County. "Here we're doing everything we can, and he's taking our case and trying to undercut our efforts."

Jackson said LePage, who spent several years working for a lumber company in Canada in the 1970s, should not be favoring foreign workers over Mainers. Jackson said he talked to others in the industry Friday who felt the same.

"We're unemployed or underemployed and [the governor's] argument is, 'We need to keep the price of wood low,'" Jackson said. "He knows the Canadians will do it for less. He doesn't seem to care about Maine workers."

Adrienne Bennett, the governor's spokeswoman, said Friday that LePage obviously wants to take care of Mainers first.

The issue of Canadian loggers working in Maine existed long before LePage took office and has been a source of tension in northern Maine for some time.

Earlier this year, LePage joined that debate by vetoing a bill that would have prohibited the Maine Department of Conservation from employing foreign laborers at state-owned logging sites.

Jackson wrote that bill to prevent landowners and contractors from skirting or violating federal and state laws by hiring

lower-cost Canadian loggers. The Allagash senator also has questioned LePage's commitment to enforcing existing laws since his administration delayed proceedings against two firms accused of violating the state's rules on use of foreign laborers.

In his veto letter to lawmakers, LePage said the bill was potentially unconstitutional. Jackson, however, said the governor's action supported a feeling held by some that he was supporting large corporations that hire Canadian workers.

Jackson said he thinks the governor should come back to Aroostook County and meet with loggers in person.

"I can get him in a roomful of loggers so he can hear our concerns directly rather than continuing to do the bidding of the Maine Forest Products Council," Jackson said, referring to the statewide lobbying organization that represents sawmills and owners of large tracts of land.

Patrick Strauch, the organization's executive director, said its members have been supportive of LePage but denied that the governor was carrying out the council's wishes.

As for the issue of Canadian workers, Strauch said Canadian loggers always have worked in parts of Maine and probably always will.

"In a lot of cases it's just a matter of geography," he said. "Even though there is an international border, more people in Canada live closer to parts of the Maine woods."

Strauch also denied that hiring Canadian workers is cheaper and said federal law allows any Maine logger to bump a bonded Canadian worker.

"The council wants every U.S. worker to have a job, but we still need to cut wood in some of those areas," he said.

The forest products industry is Maine's largest economic engine after tourism and LePage said the recent report suggests there is work. If Mainers are willing, the governor wants to hear from them.

"If there are any logging contractors that you know of that can't find a job, you have them call my office because we can put them to work," he said Thursday.