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Loggers threaten blockade

Maine firms face audit on Canadian labor use

BY KEVIN MILLER
OF THE NEWS STAFF

AUGUSTA — The U.S. Department of Labor plans to audit more than two dozen logging firms operating in Maine in response to allegations of widespread abuse of the laws allowing companies to hire Canadian workers.

But in a sign of escalating tensions in the North Woods, several Maine loggers are contemplating a border blockade in order to draw attention to the plight of Maine workers who they claim have unfairly lost jobs to Canadians.

"People are interested. I have been contacted almost daily about it," said state Sen. Troy Jackson, a logger from Allagash. "I have tried to work to not have [a blockade] happen, but I am running out of ideas here."

See Loggers, Page A2

Loggers

Continued from Page A1

On Monday, federal labor officials began the process of sending out letters to 27 firms notifying them about the coming audits. The firms, which were not identified, will have 21 days to provide requested information. Federal regulators will be looking for a variety of violations of the law allowing temporary foreign laborers, or "bordered laborers" to work in the state when there is a shortage of American workers.

The audits are in response to a preliminary investigation by Maine officials that found evidence of "pervasive and industrywide" violations of labor laws. Among those alleged violations are that some Canadian firms have failed to keep a physical location in Maine or supply their own equipment, as required under the law.

There are also allegations that Canadian firms routinely take steps to discourage Maine loggers from applying for jobs in Maine or dismiss their applications based on false pretenses.

U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud and

Gov. John Baldacci both said Monday that they were pleased that federal officials are taking the complaints seriously and responded quickly. Companies that are found to be in violation of the foreign labor laws could lose their certification as well as be banned from hiring foreign laborers for three years.

The Maine Department of Labor also has initiated action against two unnamed companies that would essentially prevent the firms from hiring Canadian laborers.

"I feel very comfortable that the U.S. Department of Labor will do what they have to do to make sure these companies meet the regulations," Michaud said.

But news of the audits received a much more tepid response from Jackson and other unemployed Maine loggers contemplating a blockade after months of frustration.

While they supported the federal government's involvement, they questioned whether anything meaningful would happen for several months because of the time it takes to conduct an audit.

"It could possibly take until the end of the season before anything happens and we can't wait that long," said Jackson,

who first notified federal officials about potential foreign labor law violations in April.

Carney McBreairty said he has more than \$2 million worth of heavy logging equipment sitting idle in his Allagash yard. McBreairty, who has worked in the woods for more than 40 years, has been unable to find work since March, yet he said Canadian crews are logging in northern Maine right now.

He said the combination of competition for jobs in Maine with Canadian workers, low wood prices and lack of enforcement of labor laws have pushed him and others to the breaking point.

"We have been putting it off for a month," McBreairty said of a potential blockade. "After a period of time here, we have to do something."

If a blockade happens — and those considering one said it is not guaranteed — it would not be the first time that Maine loggers have resorted to civil disobedience.

In October 1998, more than a dozen loggers, including Jackson, used their pickup trucks to block several private woods roads that were ports of entry between Maine and Quebec. The loggers, who were protesting many of the

same issues, stepped aside after a week when the state police got involved and the U.S. Department of Labor agreed to investigate their complaints.

This time around, the blockade would target only foreign workers in order to allow the Mainers who have found jobs in the woods to continue working, said Jackson, who entered into politics after the 1998 blockade.

Logger Steven Hafford of St. Francis said he wants to know why federal officials granted the waivers to companies seeking foreign laborers when so many American woods workers need jobs. Hafford said he believes the waivers were granted based on false claims and that there is a larger "scam" to keep wood prices going to the mills low.

Baldacci spokeswoman Joy Leach said Monday night that the governor is working with Maine's congressional delegation on the issue and that the federal Department of Labor is now actively involved. Leach said the governor believes the issue can be resolved without blockades.

"The governor is really encouraging the loggers to work with us and that this is the most effective course of action to find a solution to the situation in northern Maine," she said.