

Loggers see bill as assault on their jobs

BY GLENN ADAMS
Associated Press

AUGUSTA—Northern Maine loggers said job protections they have gained over the years would be erased if a LePage administration-backed bill reviewed Friday by a legislative committee passes.

"As a logger in Aroostook (County), this is personal," said state Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, who joined other loggers and lawmakers in a news conference before a hearing on the bill before the Labor, Commerce, Research and Economic Development Committee. Jackson said the bill is part of "an ongoing assault on Maine workers."

But Linwood Higgins of the state Labor Department said the bill represents an opportunity for Republican Gov. Paul LePage's administration to cut bureaucracy and red tape that restrain businesses and make them less competitive. Also

supporting the bill is the Maine Forest Products Council.

At issue is a proposal sponsors say would simplify the process for employers in the logging industry who hire employees from another country who have been given permission to work in this country. It would eliminate a number of regulations that have been put in place to make sure Americans' logging jobs don't go to Canadian loggers.

For example, one provision says an employer who hires foreign labor must show ownership of logging equipment used by those workers. The state has prosecuted violators in recent years.

The forest product council's Patrick Strout said the federal government has a program allowing Canadian loggers to come across the border and cut in areas where no American workers are available. But he said regulations added on by Maine effectively tie logging

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LOGGER'S WIFE

companies in red tape.

"We need relief now," Strout told the committee hearing, attended by a number of loggers who drove five hours from Aroostook to make their case.

According to Jackson, only 20 to 30 Canadian or bonded workers came across the Maine border to work in the last year, but the number was about 800 in 1998 and 3,000 in the 1970s. Jackson said repeal of protections now in place will bring a "flood" of Canadian equipment into the northern woods.

Shelly Mountain, whose husband is a logger, rejected sug-

gestions that Maine loggers won't travel long distances to cut wood in remote places where Canadians are hired.

"If you're not working, you're willing to go anywhere to work," Mountain said. "I see Canadian trucks all over the road. I have family members who have gone out of business. While they are sitting on the porch and their trucks are parked in the yard or sitting idle, Canadian trucks are going by."

The debate touches on more than work rules, and raises side issues of unemployment payments and civil rights.