

Quebec woodsman doubts wisdom of Maine mills

Operator says attracting workers in state difficult

By **Bourmond Banville**
Of the NEWS Staff

ST. PAMPHILE, Quebec — Without Maine lumber, more than half of the mills in Quebec border towns probably would close, a Canadian lumber company official says.

Yet, Denis Blanchet, vice president of operations at **Materiaux Blanchet Inc.**, located 1,000 feet from the U.S. border, says his company would likely not build mills in Maine because it would have trouble getting workers.

"There is a problem. Why do American contractors go to Est-court Station, St. Pamphile and Daaquam [in Quebec] to find men? There are not enough loggers in northern Maine," Blanchet said in an interview last week.

American loggers who blockaded three ports of entry along the Maine-Quebec border last month claimed that U.S. loggers are discriminated against in acquiring jobs, that Canadians are paid below the state's prevailing wage for woods jobs — making the jobs less than desirable for Americans, and that American logs should not go to Canadian mills for processing.



Denis Blanchet, vice president of operations at **Materiaux Blanchet Inc.**, says that two-thirds of the lumber in its Quebec yard comes from Maine. (NEWS Photo by Mark Schwane)

Blanchet has a different view. "What would Maine do with its lumber?" he asked. "They would have to build large mills in Maine," he said. "We would not build a mill there because we would have a manpower problem. There are not enough people there, and we would have to import workers from Canada."

Two-thirds of the 55 million board feet **Materiaux Blanchet Inc.** needs a year come from

Maine forests.

The company also imports lumber from Massachusetts, Vermont, New York and Pennsylvania, but the bulk of the company's wood roars across the Maine border on huge 18-wheeler trucks.

How much of the wood is cut and hauled by Americans is unknown. Blanchet said his crews, which include loggers, truckers, processor operators and foremen,

are about 50 percent American and 50 percent Canadian. He said the company has no bonds this year, meaning it has no alien workers approved for work in Maine by the state Department of Labor.

Last year, the company used 20 to 30 bonded workers in Maine. Canadians working for Blanchet have visas that don't need certification for working in Maine.

See Mills, A2, Col. 3

Operator: Maine lacking loggers

Mills, from A1

"Politicians are the only ones who have the power to do anything about the problems in the woods," he said.

He agreed with loggers' claims that wages in the Maine woods have not kept pace with wages in other industries. He blames that on mechanization and modernization that keep costs high.

While Blanchet's perspective is from the Quebec side of the border, attempts by the Bangor Daily News to talk with contractors and Canadian loggers in the northern Maine woods were fruitless last week.

The contractors refused to talk about the situation.

Loggers at a job site in T16 R14 were quick to show a reporter and photographer the way out of a site Thursday. The same journalists were told earlier in the day by a forester from Seven Islands Land Management Co. that they should not be at job sites without prior approval from company officials.

But the bottom line, Blanchet said, is that competition demands that companies cut their costs for lumber. Wood processors are more economical than less mech-

anized skidder crews, and the lower cost makes them more feasible for contractors and lumber companies.

"Because we are operating along the border, we must be very competitive," said Blanchet. "The level of competition is high and we have to keep up."

Among the equipment that's needed for the work are wood processors and feller-bunchers, which can cost up to \$700,000.

Blanchet said Canadian workers seem better trained than American loggers. He said there are schools in Quebec to train loggers on the latest machinery. Companies that sell the equipment will also train loggers on its use.

Blanchet said a four-man crew operating a wood processor can cut what used to take 12 to 15 men with skidders.

"It becomes a question of profit. Stumpage costs are higher, 50 percent higher than five years ago. We have to find less costly ways of getting our lumber to the mills," said Blanchet.

Blanchet has been in the logging industry for more than 30 years along the Maine border.

Problems like those which erupted last month come every few years.

"I really don't know the specific reasons for them blockading the border," he said. "We have mechanized and we need less men to work this year than last year. Many of our people, Canadians and Americans, no longer have jobs with us."

Blanchet said the Certified Logging Professional designation is important, saving companies Workers' Compensation money.

"Most loggers who don't have jobs, it's because they are not" certified, he said.

He said Hilton Hafford, a spokesman for blockading U.S. loggers, has been offered jobs and that contractors offered to assist him in getting the CLP designation. But, Blanchet said, Hafford has refused to become CLP-trained.

Hafford worked for Blanchet

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last year. This year, Hafford worked closer to Allagash, for Pelletier and Pelletier Logging.

"We have never discriminated against Mr. Hafford and Mr. [Stacie] Kelly," said Blanchet. Kelly is another spokesman for the blockading loggers.

Blanchet also denied paying Canadians less than Maine's prevailing wage and said claims that the Canadian government helps Canadians buy equipment to work in the Maine woods are false.

"This is a touchy situation," said Blanchet. "We can't be against Americans but for Americans. 'Canadian' has become a war cry.

"People have to understand that there are good American loggers and there are bad American loggers. It's the same with Canadians," he said.

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