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State to tackle contract logging issues

BY KEVIN MILLER
OF THE NEWS STAFF

AUGUSTA — A new state task force will look into whether any logging firms operating in Northern Maine are violating specific state and federal laws when they hire Canadian contractors.

The task force, the formation of which was announced Tuesday, will focus on potential violations of a state law requiring that the heavy equipment used by for-

eign laborers be owned by the employer, not the contractors.

One lawmaker, Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, said he believes the law is routinely violated but that the state has never enforced it, thereby costing Maine woods workers potential jobs.

"It's a good first step," Jackson, a logger, said of the task force. "Unfortunately, I can't help but feel like it's a little too late for some workers."

The panel will also attempt to

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GOV. JOHN BALDACCI

determine whether Maine

workers have an adequate opportunity to apply for jobs as well as whether companies are complying with all of the components of the federal certification process for temporary for-

eign laborers.

"There are numerous allegations and rumors about inappropriate activity concerning Canadian labor in Maine's woods," Gov. John Baldacci said in a statement. "We are putting

the resources on the ground to look into the situation, determine if there are violations and take necessary action if any are confirmed."

The task force is a result of a legislative fight this spring largely between Irving Woodlands — the dominant landowner in far northern Maine — on one side and Jackson and Rep. John Martin, D-Eagle Lake, on the other.

New Brunswick-based Irving halted work on its land in order

to pressure lawmakers to repeal a state law allowing independent contractors to enter into collective bargaining with the company. With the prospect of hundreds of Maine woods workers facing unemployment, the Legislature approved a bill from the Baldacci administration to scrap the 2004 law.

The bill stated, however, that the Maine Department of Labor will more aggressively enforce the laws regarding use of tem-

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Logging

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porary foreign or "bonded" laborers when Maine loggers are unavailable. The bill also tripled the fine for violations of the logging equipment rules when firms hire foreign workers. Companies can now be fined up to \$15,000 for violations.

While the task force grew out of the dispute with Irving, Jackson said the company has not been the one violating Maine's laws. Instead, Jackson said other Canadian firms surreptitiously turn away Maine workers and then hire Canadian crews that bring in their own equipment.

Jackson said he found what he described as 11 "clear violations" of the law out of the 14 cases he personally reviewed after filing freedom of information requests for documents filed with the state.

"The feds and Maine [Department of Labor] have failed to keep track of this program," he said.

State labor Commissioner Laura Fortman will head the task force, which is in northern Maine this week.