

State, firms cleared in logging case

Government finds compliance with rules regarding Canadian hires

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MADAWASKA — The Maine Department of Labor and Maine logging companies have been found to be in full compliance with federal laws and regulations in the certification process for the hiring of Canadian nationals to work in the Maine woods, federal officials reported Monday.

While some minor violations were found by the federal review, officials found no pattern or practice to warrant administrative action by the federal DOL, said

Roy Uhalde, deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor.

During a conference call with Valerie Landry, Maine's labor commissioner, and members of the Maine press, Uhalde announced a \$100,000 grant to the state DOL to look further into the loggers' plight, including the prevailing wage set by the state.

The survey will also delve into the question of why the numbers of Americans working in the Maine woods is declining and look at better recruiting methods to get Americans to apply for the avail-

able jobs. In the meantime, the state DOL is continuing its efforts to arrange a meeting of loggers, contractors and landowners, possibly during the first week of December.

American loggers, who earlier this fall blockaded private woods roads along the Maine-Quebec border to stop Canadian workers, want the Canadians out of the Maine woods; they want an increase in the prevailing wage, which they claim hasn't increased in 15 years; they want a nine- to 10-month cutting season, which would be more than double last

year's cutting season; and they want a better method of measuring the amount of wood cut by loggers, which determines their pay.

Northern Maine loggers held their own meeting during the weekend to discuss their concerns.

"Our main concern is and has always been that we want Canadian bonds [bonded workers] eliminated," said Hilton Hafford of Allagash, one of the spokesmen for the loggers.

"We are frustrated at this point because we feel that no one sees
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the adverse effect on the American work force," he said.

Commissioner Landry said that "the extra dollars [from the federal grant] will assist us in getting more comprehensive data on loggers' pay and finding out how many American loggers there are."

The state, explained Landry, is concerned about why there are not more Americans going into the logging profession.

"The numbers are declining," Landry noted. "Is it because of wages or is it because of other issues?"

Another problem found by the state DOL is that the median age of American loggers is in the 40s and younger people aren't becoming loggers.

The number of Canadian people

in the logging industry is also declining, according to the labor commissioner.

"It could become a major problem for the logging industry if the numbers [of Americans and Canadians] keep dropping," said Landry.

"The industry may have to make the jobs more attractive. They may have to promote more training."

Uhalde said the federal DOL is working on the issues along with Landry's office.

"It's a positive first step," Sen. Olympia Snowe said of the DOL efforts Monday in a prepared statement.

"Clearly, problems exist in the hiring of loggers along Maine's border with Canada," Snowe said. "I am optimistic that by working with loggers and contractors they

can address the issues raised."

"They are moving, slowly, but they are moving in the right direction," Rep. John Baldacci said by telephone from his home Monday afternoon.

He said his outlook is that much of the problem involves money.

"Basically it comes down to pay because some are getting little for their labor," said Baldacci. "The extra money from the DOL may help the state up its efforts in developing the prevailing wage paid to loggers."

Uhalde said he understood loggers would not be happy with determinations made to date.

"We have done this working with the laws and regulations we have," said Uhalde.

Changes in the bonded alien labor program, he said, would have to come from Congress.