

# Jobless loggers struggling to get face time with LePage

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AUGUSTA — More than a month after Gov. Paul LePage said he'd happily take a call from any unemployed or underemployed northern Maine loggers, some of those loggers are finding it difficult to get the governor's ear.

A recent email exchange between a legislative aide to Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, and the governor's scheduler highlights that challenge.

Jackson, a logger himself and a voice for the logging industry in Augusta, requested a meeting shortly after LePage

made comments at a public event in Presque Isle that rankled some loggers.

During a question-and-answer session with local residents, the governor was asked whether he would support legislation that helps Maine's struggling logging industry.

"I am in big support of Maine loggers, but I've also gone around to Maine mills and I've asked them, 'Do you have enough logs?'" LePage said, according to a video recording of the session.

The answer, the governor said, was, "No, we can't get them. We can't get the logs here."

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Troy Jackson (left) of Allagash, a Maine senator and logging equipment operator, and Carney McBreairty (right), a logging contractor, visit a logging operation in T16 R14 in August 2009, where Canadian logging crews were harvesting wood. Both men have been unable to find work, and McBreairty said his employees and equipment have been idle while work is being done by foreign labor.

# Logging

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Lumber supply is not the problem, he said. It's finding people to get the logs from the forests to the sawmills. In some parts of the state, there is no shortage of workers, but in other areas Canadian workers are needed because nobody else is available, LePage contended.

Jackson, who did not attend that event, said if the governor talked to loggers, he would hear a different story.

"He never gave Maine loggers an opportunity to meet with him at the time and I feel very strongly that what he said is not true," the senator said.

In an email dated Aug. 30, Jackson's aide, Michael Dunn, requested a face-to-face meeting between the governor and members of the Northern Maine Logging Association anytime in September.

LePage's scheduler, Jeanne St. Pierre, responded two weeks later.

"The governor would be happy to meet with the loggers and is willing to devote an hour of time during his

practical concerns of asking several loggers to drive five hours or more to Augusta.

"The governor has consistently stated that he wants to put people before politics and we can think of no better way for him to hear from the very people who are affected by political decisions," Dunn wrote, suggesting a "Capital for a Day" event in Fort Kent.

St. Pierre wrote back the following week, on Sept. 21.

"Unfortunately at this time the governor is not currently scheduled to make a return trip to Fort Kent, but we would be happy to consider a future opportunity when the governor is scheduled to be there," she wrote, adding that the offer for constituent hours still stood.

Jackson said he's not satisfied.

"I think he realized he said something he shouldn't have and he's not willing to come back and face the music," he said. "He put this out there. We're not just going to let this go."

Adrienne Bennett, the governor's spokeswoman, said her office gets hundreds of requests for meetings and said those making the request don't get to dictate the terms. She pointed out that most peo-

ple behind this as well," she said.

Bennett also said Jackson is the only one who has contacted the governor's office about logging jobs in the last month.

Shelly Mountain of Mapleton has a stake in the Northern Maine logging industry. Her husband is a logger and her sons are hoping to make logging their career path, too.

In fact, it was Mountain who asked LePage the question in Presque Isle that elicited his comments about the logging industry. She said it wasn't just his answer that bothered her; it was the way he dismissed her concerns.

"Maine loggers can't do it for the rates the landowners and mill owners want to pay them. Canadians will," she said. "I don't know how we can communicate this to him. That's part of the problem. He seems to only be talking to mill owners, not to loggers."

The issue of Canadian loggers working in Maine existed long before LePage took office and has been a source of tension in northern Maine for some time.

Earlier this year, LePage entered that debate by vetoing a bill that would have prohibited the Maine Department of

Conservation from employing foreign laborers at state-owned logging sites.

Jackson wrote that bill to prevent landowners and contractors from skirting or violating federal and state laws by hiring lower-cost Canadian loggers. The Allagash senator also has questioned LePage's commitment to enforcing existing laws since his administration delayed proceedings against two firms accused of violating the state's rules on use of foreign laborers.

In his veto letter to lawmakers, LePage said the bill was potentially unconstitutional. Jackson argued that the governor's action suggested he supported large corporations that hire Canadian workers.

Bennett, however, said the governor remains committed to Maine loggers and questioned whether the problem is as big as Jackson claims.

Mountain said she and her husband have talked to loggers, including many who supported LePage, who want to speak out publicly about this issue but fear losing current or future jobs.

"If he agreed to meet with them, maybe they could have an open dialogue," she said.