

Woods workers weigh in on need for foreign help

BY JULIA BAYLY
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

FORT KENT — Emotions were high at a Maine Department of Labor public hearing where close to 100 loggers, truckers and contractors were more interested in debating the place of foreign workers in the Maine woods than the rules governing the practice.

"Logging in the Maine woods is hard work," said Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Allagash. "The challenge gets even tougher when skilled Maine workers see opportunities slip away because some companies bypass state and fed-

eral laws for foreign labor."

Jackson, himself a logger, has been on the front lines of labor relations in the Maine woods for close to two decades. Last session he introduced legislation increasing penalties for violating state laws requiring logging companies to provide proof of ownership of any logging equipment used by H-2A, or bonded, foreign workers in Maine.

Members of the Maine Department of Labor were at the Fort Kent town office Friday afternoon seeking comment specific to new rules included with the legislation.

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That hearing lasted less than an hour before Louise Fortman, Maine's labor commissioner, opened the meeting to general discussion.

The idea behind the bonded labor program was to address shortages of [United States] workers to pick apples or broccoli back during World War II," Jackson said Friday afternoon. "Somewhere along the line someone got the bright idea to use it in the logging industry."

Under current labor law logging contractors may hire a specific number of bonded foreign workers if they are unable to hire enough U.S. citizens to operate company logging equipment.

Bonded workers are not allowed to bring their own equipment to operate in the Maine woods, a practice Jackson and several of the loggers at Friday's hearing said has become commonplace over the past several decades due to lack of regulatory enforcement.

Jackson said there are many people in his district who have

lost woods jobs when contractors instead hired Canadian workers.

"We don't want [the Canadians] here and we don't want their equipment," Stacey Kelly, a long-time logger from Allagash, said. "It comes down to me needing a job and [the contractor] giving that job to a Canadian, and it

"It's nothing personal against the Canadians, but if it was up to me we would go five years without Canadians in the [Maine] woods and see what happens."

STACEY KELLY, LOGGER

should have been given to me." Kelly was quick to say he has the utmost respect for the Canadian men who work in the woods — noting he often relies on their French-English translation assistance at the Canadian mills, but said he's tired of losing work.

"It's nothing personal against the Canadians, but if it was up to me we would go five years without Canadians in the [Maine] woods and see what happens," Kelly said.

What would happen, said con-

tractor Bruce Marquis, is operators — and workers — would lose out.

"OK, let's put in all U.S. workers," Marquis said. "That happened one year and I lost \$125,000."

Marquis, who operates Robinson Lumber on the Maine-Quebec border, said it's difficult to attract American workers to the remote locations.

"But there are a lot of Canadian families who have worked there for generations," Marquis said. "I've got \$4 million in equipment and \$73,000 in payments a month — who's going to pay that for me?"

Claire Theriault, who with her husband, Herman, operates a log trucking business out of Fort Kent said her family business could not survive without Canadian labor.

"I look at the U.S. guys when we hire but some have OUIs and some are men you would not want to hire," Theriault said. "We need them [the Canadians] to survive."

Jackson agreed, but said there are too many businesses abusing the bonded labor program.

"The law says you are supposed to hire Americans first, but I sat around for three months waiting for work," he said. "I might not be the best delimeter operator, but I've been at it 30 years."

Logger Robert McBreairety agreed there are plenty of

instances of abuse in the system, but worried the loggers could become their own worst enemies.

"If we don't get this straightened out, we all might as well leave," McBreairety said. "There is no use fighting among our selves."

While little testimony was actually presented at the scheduled hearing, Fortman said she was glad she and her colleagues traveled to northern Maine.

"This is a very complex issue," Fortman said. "These new rules are just a tiny sliver of it."

What was clear from the comments during the post-hearing discussion, Fortman said, was all the workers held at least one thing in common.

"What is clear is people want a fair shot at a decent job," Fortman said.

Information about the rule changes and legislation may be read at www.maine.gov/labor/bls.

Written comment on the rules will be accepted for the next 10 days and must be mailed to William A. Peabody, director, Bureau of Labor Standards, 45 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0045. The deadline for written comment is Dec. 29.



Jackson



Fortman