



Ecosystem Workforce Program

BRIEFING PAPER # 11

Working Conditions in Labor-Intensive Forestry Jobs in Oregon

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Forestry workers in labor-intensive jobs have long been an important, yet under recognized, component of forest management on both public and private lands. These workers perform strenuous, seasonal activities, such as planting and maintaining tree seedlings, thinning small trees, piling and burning brush and fighting wildland fires. They also play a major role in forest and watershed restoration.

The study summarized here asked: (1) How do forestry workers in labor-intensive jobs construct their work lives to address the seasonality of forest work? (2) What are the working conditions of forest workers in labor-intensive jobs, and how do these conditions differ across ethnic groups?

Approach

We conducted in-depth interviews with 94 people in western Oregon between 2003 and 2005. Of those interviewed, 89 forest workers and five small forest contractors. Of those interviewed, 48 were Hispanic and 46 were non-Hispanic. Nearly all non-Hispanic workers were white, and nearly all Hispanics had been born in Mexico.

Seasonal Patterns of Work

Most workers performed several forest-related activities. People who thinned commonly also piled trees and brush and were firefighters. Another group of jobs, primarily for Hispanics, involved applying herbicides, planting trees, poisoning trees, and baiting gophers. Although many non-Hispanics had experience in tree planting, only a few had done any planting during the year prior to their interview.

At least two patterns emerged in how people's work changed over the course of the year. One cluster of people worked in the woods most of the year, with little work outside of forestry. A second set of workers worked in forestry one or two seasons of the year. Hispanic workers employed seasonally often

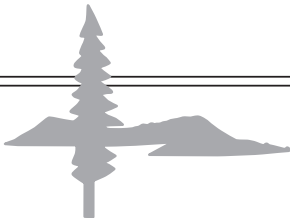
also worked in agriculture and construction. Non-Hispanics often worked in activities associated with forestry and a few attended college.

Working Conditions

Hispanic workers appeared more vulnerable than non-Hispanics to contractors who would fire them if they were injured or complained about working conditions. Although many Hispanics enjoyed good working conditions, many faced verbal abuse from supervisors, believed they would not be compensated if they were to be injured on the job, were not paid the wages they expected, and saw little opportunity for advancement. In contrast, non-Hispanics were rarely cheated out of wages, saw the potential to talk through conflicts with supervisors or owners, and did not express the same level of concern about compensation if injured on the job.

Overtime and travel pay

Overtime pay was relatively infrequent for both Hispanics and non-Hispanics, except when on fire-crew contracts. For some, work was limited to a 40-hour week. For others, they were paid at the regular rate when they worked overtime. Still others were paid for 40 hours, even when they worked more.



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Except when they are driving a company van or performing fire suppression, most forest workers were not paid for travel to and from the worksite, even when they were in a company vehicle.

Workplace safety and on-the-job injuries

Forest work is inherently dangerous because it involves chain saws, steep slopes, fire, narrow, winding roads, and heavy physical labor. Although some workers had been injured and many discussed how dangerous the work was, few had ever used worker's compensation insurance. One Hispanic man said that he had been injured while thinning. He was taken to the hospital, stitched, and told to rest for one week. Many Hispanics, however, felt that if they reported an injury they would be fired. The non-Hispanics did not seem to have the same sense that they would not receive assistance if they were injured on the job. Those who had been injured, however, did have mixed experiences with worker's compensation.

Choosing forest work

When asked what they would choose if they could have another job with the same wage, 73 percent of Hispanics said that they would prefer to work in another field. Many were concerned that forest work was too dangerous. In contrast, only 30 percent of non-Hispanic workers would work in a different field if they could earn the same money. Some pointed out that they could be earning more money doing other work. Differences in the desire to continue in forestry work is not likely simply a result of the differences in preferences but also differences in working conditions.

Government Oversight, Worker Recourse, and Worker Representation

More often than not, the workers did not believe that labor laws were enforced, they had recourse if they felt unfairly treated, or there were organizations to assist them. Most said that if they were treated poorly, they would just quit. This was particularly true for Hispanic workers. Most non-Hispanic

For more information:

The complete study can be found in the EWP Working Paper entitled, Working Conditions in Labor-Intensive Forestry Jobs in Oregon, which is available on the Web at <http://ewp.uoregon.edu>.

workers also said that they would quit but, unlike Hispanics, many said that they would talk to their superiors to try to work out problems first.

Worker Recommendations for Improvements

Workers were asked how the government and employers could make their job better. The most common Hispanic recommendation for employers was to treat workers with respect. Non-Hispanics were most often interested in higher wages and more continuous work.

Conclusion

Forest workers shared many similarities in their jobs, such as physically demanding work, good hourly pay relative to many other options, and seasonality of work. The seasonal ebb and flow of work was markedly similar for Hispanics and non-Hispanics. Hispanics and non-Hispanics thinned trees, fought fires, and applied herbicides.

Despite the similarities, there are stark differences in working conditions as well. Although a few non-Hispanic workers had uncompensated injuries or believed they had not been paid properly and some Hispanic workers had consistently good working conditions, these were the exceptions. Particularly striking were Hispanic reports of being constantly yelled at by crew bosses who demanded faster work and stories of uncompensated injuries. Many Hispanics feared that if they complained they would not only be fired from the current job but blackballed entirely and no longer able to find forest work. They worked in forestry largely because it seemed to pay better than other available alternatives. But, most Hispanic workers had little hope of advancement unless they could learn English or somehow obtain legal status in the United States. Bilingual workers who were legal permanent residents were either already crew bosses or had hopes of becoming one.

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