



Ecosystem Workforce Program

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Ethnic Differences in Job Quality Among Contract Forest Workers

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For more than a decade, the Forest Service and community-based forestry organizations have sought to create high quality jobs in public lands communities restoring national forests. The strategy has been for the federal government to hire local contractors to undertake restoration and maintenance activities such as decommissioning roads, building and maintaining trails, restoring natural streams, thinning overstocked forest stands, and collecting data for monitoring. With this work, advocates have sought to create a restoration and maintenance industry that offers rural communities quality jobs. These jobs would ideally provide not only high wages, but also dependable local employment opportunities close to home.

Critics of these efforts have argued that this strategy ignores the existence of a mobile, Hispanic forestry services workforce. This workforce, they point out, undertakes the most laborious forestry restoration and maintenance tasks in the poorest working conditions. Critics fear that strategies focused on local workers neglect the working conditions and needs of these mobile workers. Although this debate has gone on for some time, there has been little systematic, quantified information about the working conditions of forest workers, regardless of their ethnicity. To address this debate, this study set out to compare the working conditions of Hispanic and white workers.

Approach

The study involved interviewing 131 owners or managers of businesses that contracted with the Forest Service between 1998 and 2002 to work on the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest in Colorado, Bitterroot in Montana, Coconino in Arizona, Deschutes in Oregon, Nantahala in North Carolina, and Willamette in Oregon.

This study compared working conditions using three measures of job quality. First, compensation was measured by asking contractors if they offered health insurance to employees. Second, job duration was measured by evaluating seasonal fluctuations in employment. Third, the opportunity for workers to work close to home was considered.

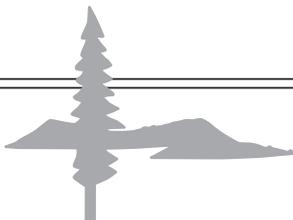
Findings

The study has three major findings.

First, compared to their frequency in the population, Hispanics were over represented in the forestry restoration and maintenance workforce.

Second, there was a statistically significant difference between Hispanics and white workers in the type of work they performed. Hispanics were more likely to perform labor-intensive work such as small diameter tree thinning and tree planting. White workers were more likely to undertake equipment-intensive work such as road restoration and technical services such as surveying.

Third, Hispanic workers had lower job quality across all three measures. Hispanics appeared to be more likely than white workers to work away from home and seasonally, and less likely to be



offered health insurance. This is largely by virtue of the type of work that they perform. Specifically, Hispanics tend to work for companies performing labor-intensive services and these companies are more apt to offer lower job quality than equipment and technical companies. Additionally, Hispanics have poorer job quality even when we control for the type of work they perform. That is, the study predicts that a Hispanic would have slightly worse job quality than a white worker even when performing similar work. The larger differences, however, were by virtue of ethnic division in the work types.

In every measure of job quality (mobility, compensation, and seasonality), there are statistically significant differences between the two groups with Hispanic's more likely to face worse working conditions. That said, not all labor-intensive workers were Hispanic and not all equipment-intensive workers were white. Thirty-three percent of labor-intensive workers were white. Twenty-three percent equipment-intensive workers were Hispanic—still above the proportion of Hispanics in the national population. In addition, both Hispanics and whites are more likely than not to work away from home most of the time, without company-sponsored health care, and work seasonally, suggesting that job quality for many restoration workers was low, regardless of their ethnicity.

For more information:

The complete study can be found in the article, "Ethnic Differences in Job Quality among Contract Forest Workers on Six National Forests," forthcoming in *Policy Sciences* at www.springerlink.com or by contacting the Ecosystem Workforce Program at ewp@uoregon.edu.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The abundance of Hispanic workers in the forestry restoration and maintenance industry as well as the relative low job quality for all workers (but particularly Hispanics) suggests that the forest labor market (for at least the six national forests studied) replicates the US labor market. This labor market, like many in the United States, offers low quality jobs to Hispanic workers and, to a lesser extent, to those people who work in sectors with a large proportion of Hispanic workers.

This study's findings about differences in job quality between Hispanic and white workers as well as the overall low job quality for most workers regardless of ethnicity has implications both for the efforts of forest worker organizations and those who promote forest restoration as a conservation-based development strategy for rural communities. For forest workers organizations, this study may provide evidence useful for worker organizing campaigns. But it also suggests that there may be opportunities for multi-ethnic organizing because many white workers face the same poor working conditions as Hispanics.

For rural community development organizations, these results suggest that attempting to compete in the forest restoration business writ large may be difficult. This is due to the fact that the business model of labor-intensive contractors seems to include drawing on large pools of low-cost seasonal Hispanic laborers. Rural communities seeking to create high-quality jobs may be better off developing equipment-intensive and technical businesses, which are not as dependent on mobilizing large numbers of people. In addition, this suggests that organizations focused on rural community development need to build alliances with forest worker organizations to address job quality problems that face both white and Hispanic workers.

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