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# Timber's fallen

*State hearings reveal the plight of immigrant forestry workers who live in fear of retaliation if they speak out*

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This is part 1 of a three-part series on the working conditions and treatment of immigrant forestry workers.

Any Oregonian who watches network television is probably familiar with periodic campaigns of state-sponsored ads boasting “strong laws” in Oregon that require replanting after logging and other healthy-forest management practices. These ads are paid for by taxes collected from the timber industry and broadcast on its behalf.

What you won’t see in those ads is the invisible labor force that keeps the timber industry, U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management compliant with those “strong laws.”

For the past three decades, Oregon’s timber and forestry sectors have been hoisted up on the backs of thousands of immigrant and guest workers from Latin America. But language barriers and the isolated nature of their work has kept them out of public view, given them little recourse for workplace violations and made them susceptible to widespread

exploitation.

That was the sobering message delivered by immigrant workers and their advocates before the governor’s Environmental Justice Task Force in September. The testimony has drawn the attention of Oregon’s top industry regulators, Bureau of Labor and Industry Commissioner Brad Avakian and Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division Administrator Michael Wood, both of whom will join the task force’s continued discussion around issues facing immigrant forestry and farm workers on Friday.

For first-generation American Joel Iboa, forestry and sawmill work has been his family’s legacy. He grew up with relatives who were missing body parts and suffering the health effects of working in Oregon’s forests, sawmills and fields. He listened as his aunts and uncles told what he described as horror stories about accidents out in the forest and gross mistreatment of workers, sometimes they laughed while he sat quietly in disbelief.

Iboa’s family immigrated to Oregon from rural areas of Zacatecas, a state in North Central Mexico known for silver mining and agriculture. The economy in Zacatecas is seasonally driven and weather dependent; no rain means no money.

His father, Joel Iboa Montes, came to Medford in the mid 1980s just after turning 18. The middle child of nine siblings, he had followed his older brothers north with dreams of going to college.

He arrived on a Saturday night in the middle of winter. The following Monday, his brothers woke him before sunrise. They would be “pulling trees” that day. It was cold. Montes was used to the temperate 80-degree winters of Central Mexico.

“I get there,” he remembered, “I see this huge, long field – rows that were four feet across, and I couldn’t see the end of it, at least a mile in length. I see 50 people: women, men and even children, and they all speak Spanish. And I’m like, ‘OK, this is

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