

TIMBER, from page 4

cool.' Then I see a few white folks, but they're the ones that have a really nice jacket, they're driving the tractors, they're inside the cab or they're just walking around with their rubber boots, insulated and well covered."

The day was spent pulling saplings from the frozen earth for later replanting in the forest. The rubber boots and gloves he wore didn't keep out the frigid cold. By the day's end, his hands were bleeding and his body ached so badly he could barely move.

In Mexico, he planted crops – beans, squash and corn. He had raised livestock as a ranch hand. "I was used to work," he said, "but not under these conditions and definitely not pulling trees and having my back bent all day long."

He had been pulling trees for a month, miserably, when his brothers came to him with news of a job change.

"They started telling me that those trees that we were pulling – we were going to go out into the woods and we were going to plant them – and that it was much worse!" he said. "I'm like, 'Great. So I'm going from this to something much worse?'"

He planted trees off and on for the next five years. "You absolutely do it because you have to – to survive," he said. "For me, it was the lack of understanding of the language at that time, and so I did it because I had to do it."

Because many reforestation workers have families to feed and few other options given their immigration status, they keep their heads down and their mouths shut, out of fear of being blacklisted from the industry for reporting commonplace on-the-job injuries, dangerous working conditions and wage theft.

They pile into vans before dawn to travel – sometimes for several unpaid hours – to worksites in forests across the Pacific Northwest.

They carry 50-pound bags full of saplings, often on steep inclines during winter months; planting more than 40 million trees each year.

They swing chainsaws and spray herbicides – in many cases with no formal training. At night, far from home, they are commonly put up in motel rooms where the bodies outnumber the beds.

When they're working on public lands, tax dollars pay their wages as they fulfill government contracts.

But they don't work directly for timber companies and government agencies, but for the hundreds of small companies across the state that win reforestation contracts – removing any liability from the government or timber industry for their abuse.

Montes found time to take English classes between jobs, practicing with his site supervisors when he could. It helped get him and his brothers work at a sawmill in Monroe. It was stable, but not better, he said.

As in reforestation, many jobs in today's sawmills are also filled by immigrant workers.

One day while he and his brothers were working at the sawmill, the youngest of the clan got his jacket caught in a chipper. His arm was pulled into the machinery, tearing it off his body at the shoulder. He was only 19 years old.

"It was an accident that could have been

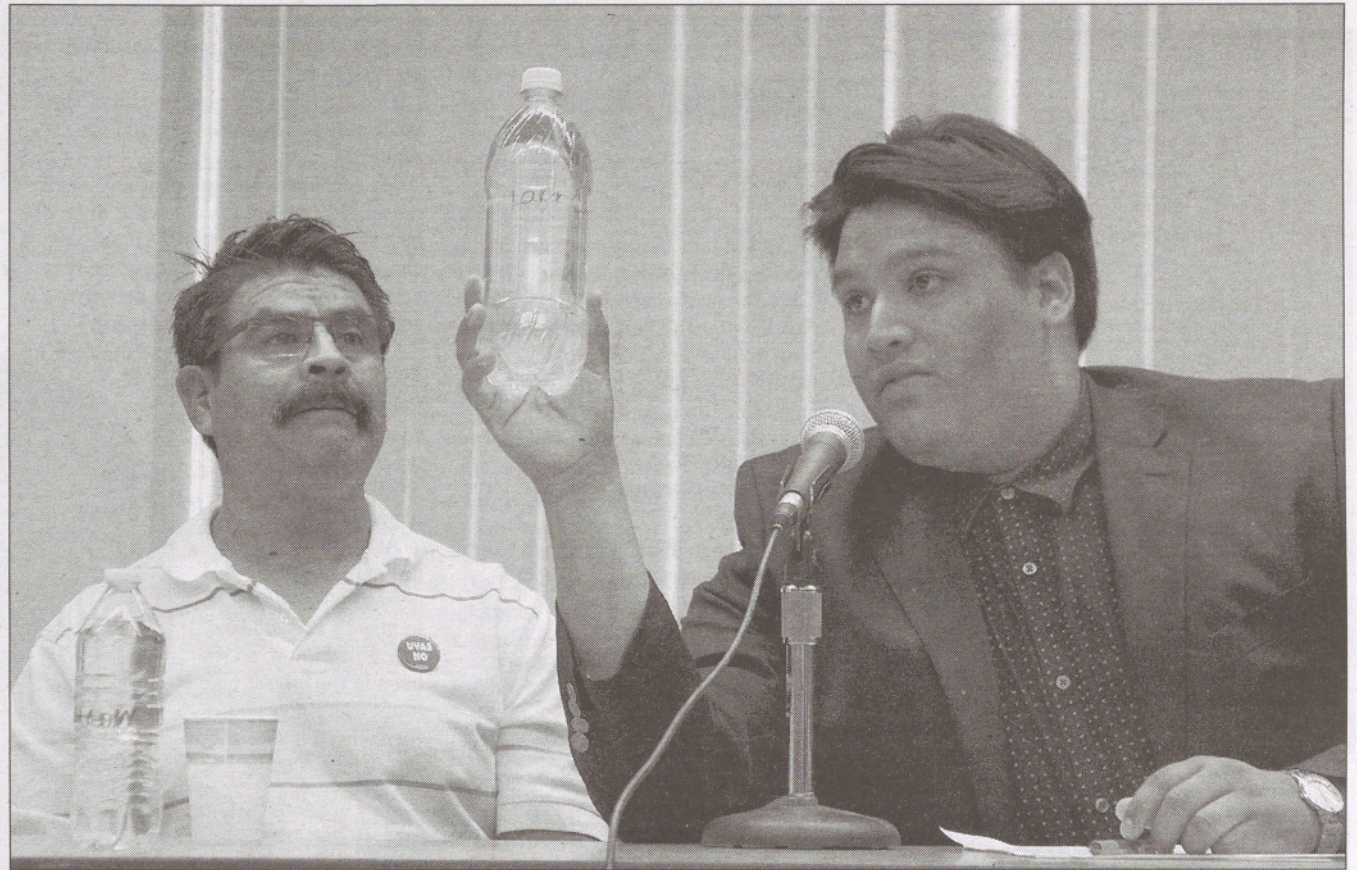


PHOTO BY NATALIE HARDWICKE

Joel Iboa holds up a bottle of murky water, showing the Governor's Environmental Task Force in September what immigrant laborers are drinking at a labor camp near Medford in Southern, Oregon. Seated next to him is Dagoberto Morales, founder and director of Southern Oregon Center for Farmworker Advocacy.

avoided," said Montes, adding that a protective cover that should have prevented the amputation was missing. He had to retrieve his little brother's mangled arm from the machine after the incident.

About 20 years later, in Jan. 2015, Oregon Safety and Health Administration cited that same mill for 15 violations after two inspectors toured the facilities. In addition to missing flooring and railings near dangerous machinery, they found employees were applying a fungicide to wood that can cause blindness without any facial protection or training, let alone gloves. There was no eyewash available in case of emergency.

Iboa watched his uncle try to get by with only one arm; an undocumented immigrant, he was never eligible for disability benefits and struggled to find work. He shudders to think he still has family at work in that mill.

Another uncle is missing fingers from years of farm work. Iboa said his grandfather's brother, well into his 70s with no retirement money, continues to work long days in the peach orchards near Medford. His aunt told stories of being sprayed directly with pesticides while working in strawberry fields.

And now, said Iboa, he's watching cousins his age fall into those same lines of work.

"The same stories I heard growing up," said Iboa, "are the same stories I hear now from my cousins."

Montes said it makes him furious to watch his nieces and nephews doing the manual labor that he made certain his own three children would never have to do.

The Northwest Forest Worker Center has been advocating on behalf of reforestation workers since 1997. Headed by

Carl Wilmsen, the nonprofit has offices in the Bay Area and Medford.

A survey conducted by the center in 2012 gives a glimpse into just how frequent these workers are denied basic rights, such as water and rest breaks, and how often their supervisors short them on pay.

Staff at the center interviewed 150 workers in Jackson and Josephine counties in Southern Oregon. Those workers included employees from exactly half of the 42 reforestation contractors operating in that area.

Forty-eight percent of workers reported that they don't get paid time and a half when they work more than 40 hours in a week, and 45 percent said they've been shorted on pay during the year leading up to the survey. One in 8 said it happened more than six times.

Nearly all of the workers reported they worked out of state during the prior 12 months, and more than three-quarters said there were not enough beds for all the workers staying in the company-supplied motel rooms.

Ninety-five percent said the safety equipment they were using is "sometimes or always worn out," which is a problem when working with chainsaws.

Additionally, only 39 percent reported receiving safety training. The training they did get was usually just few minutes.

Despite the rigorous nature of their work, sometimes in extreme heat, more than three-fourths of the survey respondents reported never getting rest breaks and the same amount reported that they don't always get a lunch break.

More than half reported the contractor they work for does not always provide drinking water, with 10 percent saying they drink from mountain streams – putting them at risk of contracting E-coli or giardia.

In November, Oregon OSHA announced it was awarding the Northwest Forest Worker Center \$40,000 to combat heat-related illnesses among forestry workers by educating workers about their right to take breaks and the importance of hydrating.

When asked why a government regulator is awarding money to teach workers how to stick up for themselves rather than enforcing the laws that already exist to protect them, OSHA Administrator Michael Wood said his staffing levels are set by legislatures.

Wood said over the past 20 years, the number of Oregon OSHA inspectors has been cut in half. Today, there are 48 safety inspectors and 28 health inspectors for the entire state of Oregon. They inspect 3 percent of all workplaces each year.

But, he said, the more dangerous the jobsite, the more likely it is to be inspected.

Between 2011 and 2015, an average of 14 of Oregon's 284 reforestation employers were inspected each year.

The majority of contractors over that five-year period were found to be non-compliant, and citations issued were consistent with data collected by the Northwest Forest Workers Center.

Wilmsen said the center hears a lot of complaints from injured workers whose employer told them to lie at the hospital about how they were hurt in an effort to avoid workers' compensation claims.

Street Roots asked Jennifer Flood, the state's ombudsman for injured workers, if this scenario sounded familiar.

"Unfortunately yes, it does," she said. While it isn't a forestry-specific problem, she said forestry workers are more vulnerable to it.

Forest workers who initially lied about their injury typically call her office because they are having trouble paying bills when

See TIMBER, page 7