



PHOTO COURTESY OF LOMAKATSI RESTORATION PROJECT

A Lomakatsi Restoration Project employee thins for fuels reduction in the Ashland Watershed.

Timber's fallen: Part II

Enforcement of labor laws in Oregon's forests, where workers are often abused, is spotty and lacks bite

THE SERIES

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

Last week: State hearings reveal the vulnerability of workers who live in fear of retaliation if they speak out. Read Part I of this series at news.streetroots.org.

BY EMILY GREEN
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It was raining on the November morning 25-year-old Teodoro Ponce-Leon bled to death in the mountains northeast of Brookings.

Before sunrise, a van had delivered him and other Latino immigrant forestry workers, some in the U.S. from Mexico on guest-worker visas, to a remote jobsite in the Chetco River Drainage in Southwest Oregon.

By 8:45 a.m., he was dead, leaving behind a wife and child in Medford, according to Curry County Sheriff's Office reports.

The circumstances around Ponce-Leon's death in 2011, and the ensuing investigation, illustrate the dangers facing many of the thousands of Latin American immigrants working in Oregon's forests. It also serves as an example of how little their employers are held accountable for actions that can contribute to serious injury and death.

At the time of the accident, Ponce-Leon was alone; about 300 yards up a steep ravine cutting the limbs off downed oak trees for later burning. A state investigation determined the chainsaw he was using likely kicked back, resulting in a deep laceration across his lower right jaw and neck, which severed his aorta.

His supervisor found him unconscious and told investigators the young father died in his arms moments after he had propped him up and tried to stop the bleeding by putting his fingers in the cut across his neck.

His death came just five days into a new job working for a subcontractor that was hired to stop the spread of disease among oak trees on Bureau of Land Management property.

Ponce-Leon hadn't signed any paperwork – his employer didn't even know his last name, telling inspectors it was Ponce-Villasenor.

He was wielding a Stihl MS 460 chainsaw – but he wasn't provided with the saw's

instructions, which warn it's capable of severe kickbacks capable of causing fatal injury.

State investigation records show Ponce-Leon hadn't received any training – on the chainsaw, safety or otherwise – since he'd been hired on Nov. 18.

The absence of thorough training among many reforestation workers performing laborious and often dangerous tasks in Oregon's forests each year is a primary concern of advocates fighting for better working conditions on their behalf.

Reforestation workers are often employed by contractors to perform the work that keeps timber companies and government land management agencies compliant with healthy forest laws.

They thin trees to combat wildfires, plant saplings after commercial logging clears the land and apply toxic herbicides and

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