



PHOTO COURTESY OF LOMAKATSI RESTORATION PROJECT

Two Lomakatsi employees clear and burn brush at Table Rock in Southern Oregon. Lomakatsi is a nonprofit that collaborates with native tribes, cities and other nonprofits to complete restoration projects while providing benefits to the area communities.

Timber's fallen: Part III

Grassroots efforts show improving working conditions in Oregon's reforestation industry is possible

THE SERIES

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

Read previous articles in this series at news.streetroots.org.

BY EMILY GREEN
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Marko Bey was sitting in on the squatters' movement and organizing soup kitchens on New York City's Lower East Side when he set his sights on the Pacific Northwest.

He was 19 when he arrived in Oregon. He needed to work, so he took a job planting trees.

Today he coordinates large-scale ecological restoration projects in Southern Oregon, but back then, he was an idealistic kid who just wanted to stop clear-cutting.

It was 1987, and an increasing number of tree planters and other reforestation workers in America's forests were Hispanic immigrants. It was a shift from 10 years earlier when hippies and other Anglo outliers were filling these jobs.

Bey worked across Oregon and Northern California throughout his 20s under a handful of reforestation contractors.

He said he enjoyed the camaraderie among crewmembers but was troubled by

what he saw.

"The land was being devastated by big industry, and the workers were being exploited," he said.

Three decades later, healthier forest policies have emerged to circumvent wholesale devastation of the land, but abuse and exploitation of immigrant forestry workers endures.

Advocates and reforestation operators say effective policy changes will need to come from the top down – whether that means changes in government contracting policies, a better strategy for enforcing labor laws, stiffer penalties for serious safety violations, or all of the above.

During its September meeting, Oregon's Environmental Justice Task Force listened to Latino forest workers and farmworkers testify about their experiences with wage theft, dangerous working conditions, exposure to toxic chemicals, and retaliation for reporting violations and injuries.

Since then, the task force has been formulating recommendations for better

protecting these vulnerable workers, which it will forward to Gov. Kate Brown.

Task force chair Ben Duncan said in an email, "The testimony we heard in September moved all of us, for its passion, its pain, and perhaps most importantly, for our work, for hope in a better future for those in our state who are most impacted by environmental and workplace hazard."

He said the task force will work with state agencies to provide more information to workers about their rights and will examine current enforcement investigations to ensure training is adequate and protective of workers.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, who's taken up issues around H-2B guest workers, said more needs to be done to protect all Oregon workers.

The H-2B non-agricultural worker visa program allowed for more than 800 foreign workers, primarily from Latin America, to fill forestry jobs in Oregon in 2013. Riders

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