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HISPANIC LOGGING WORKER SAFETY IN THE SOUTH

Personnel: safety

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INTRODUCTION: Hispanic (Spanish-speaking) workers have entered the logging workforce in the South in significant numbers during the past ten years. According to the U.S. Labor Department, Hispanic workers in the construction and agriculture industries have significantly higher injury rates than non-Hispanics do. In view of that trend, of logging workers' generally high exposure to the risk of injury, and the barriers which language difficulties may present to workplace safety and safety training effectiveness, there is concern about the safety of these Spanish-speaking logging workers.

Virginia Tech forest operations researchers, with assistance from FRA's Southwide Safety Committee and funding from the U.S. Forest Service Forest Operations Research Unit, recently completed a study addressing this issue. Study objectives were (1) to determine the current percentage of Hispanic workers in the Southern logging workforce, (2) to document the current status of safety training for these workers, and (3) to develop recommendations to address exposures identified.

STUDY METHODS: During the summer of 2005, field representatives from three cooperating Workers Compensation Insurance providers (Amerisafe, Davis-Garvin, and Forestry Mutual) surveyed 1,890 logging operations across the South, from Virginia to Texas. For each operation, these field representatives recorded the total number of workers on individual crews, the number of Spanish-speaking workers, and the locations. Following the survey, 41 sample loggers who currently employ Hispanic workers were interviewed about safety issues regarding these workers, and their responses were summarized.

STUDY RESULTS:

- While Spanish-speaking workers currently account for only 3.37% of the total logging workforce in the South, 10% of the crews surveyed employed one or more Spanish-speaking workers.
- The highest concentrations of Hispanic logging workers were found in Arkansas and North Carolina. The lowest numbers were found in Louisiana and Tennessee.
- Loggers tend to employ 1 or 2 Hispanic workers as part of a larger crew, rather than form predominantly Hispanic crews. The median number of Hispanic employees on the 192 logging crews that employed Hispanics was two.
- The average length of employment for Hispanic workers was 6 years.
- Ninety percent (90%) of the sample loggers interviewed employed at least one Hispanic worker *speaking* English well enough to interpret verbal instructions to other Spanish-speaking workers on the crew.

- Twenty-one of the 41 loggers interviewed (51%) employed at least one Spanish-speaking worker *reading* English well enough to translate written information to other Hispanics on the crew.
- Loggers rated “*hands-on demonstration training*,” followed by “*using a bilingual worker to interpret a tailgate safety meeting*,” followed by “*attending a local safety training program conducted by a Spanish-speaking instructor*” as the most effective ways to conduct logging safety training for Hispanic workers.
- Forty-four percent (44%) of the loggers interviewed reported that one or more of their Hispanic workers had been injured on the job. However, 85% believed that their Hispanic workers were very safety conscious.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Based on the study results, the following recommendations regarding safety training for Hispanic logging workers are offered:

- Further research should be done in the near future to determine if Spanish-speaking logging workers have a higher injury rate than non-Hispanic workers, as is the case in construction and agriculture.
- Continue to monitor closely the Hispanic worker population in the logging industry. Depending on political and economic factors, it could increase in coming years to the point that injury rates may be affected.
- Simply translating and distributing written logging safety training materials will likely not provide effective safety training for a majority of Spanish-speaking workers, many of whom may be illiterate.
- To be effective, safety training for Spanish-speaking logging workers should be “customized” to fit the location/situation. For example, in areas where higher concentrations of Hispanic workers are found, such as Arkansas and eastern North Carolina, bilingual safety instructors could be identified and used for group training sessions. Loggers should determine the English comprehension and English/Spanish literacy level of each Hispanic worker on their crew, and administer training accordingly.

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