

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Forest Guild Report Addresses Plight of Southeast Latino Forest Workers *Undocumented and Guest Workers Face Maltreatment and Injustice***

The Forest Guild today released its most recent report, *Maltreatment and Injustice: An Overview of the Plight of Latino Forest Workers in the Southeast*, which assesses the complex issues surrounding the exploitation of legal and undocumented Latino forest workers in the forestry industry in Georgia, North and South Carolina, Florida, and Alabama. The document traces the history of the dramatic population increase within the last 20 years of Latino forest workers in the Southeast region of the United States, most coming from Mexico and to a lesser extent Guatemala. This demographic increase in the Southeast parallels the shift in our nation's forestry sector to the region from the Northwest over the past decade and a half.

An understanding of this dramatic demographic change that has occurred in the Southeast will bolster any successful attempt to ameliorate the current plight of Latino undocumented and guest workers in the region. The Forest Guild has long supported environmental justice as part of our national commitment to sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities which depend upon them.

“Through the Forest Guild’s community forestry work over the years, we’ve paid considerable attention to issues regarding the use of guest workers and undocumented workers for labor in the forest,” noted **Forest Guild Region Director Mike DeBonis**. “The issue of maltreatment and injustice facing Latino forest workers in the Southeast is one that we believe must be acknowledged and addressed.”

#### **The H-2B Program is Flawed.**

Most large scale forest operations are comprised of mainly foreign guest workers (H-2B visa holders) while smaller operations more often rely on undocumented workers. Although forestry

working conditions and wages vary widely, it is clear that the lack of regulation and oversight leaves many Latino workers, both undocumented and H-2B guest workers, vulnerable to exploitation and maltreatment. Latino H-2B forest workers are bound to a single employer, have no access to legal assistance, are denied medical benefits for work-related injuries, and are often forced to live in substandard conditions and underpaid for their work.

### **Undocumented Workers are Disenfranchised**

Overwhelmingly young, single men with limited or no English language skills, they are forced to live and work “under the radar” in constant fear of immediate deportation. The large supply of Latino workers willing to do low paying forestry work, their nonexistent or limited English language skills, the lack of government oversight and regulations, and the disparate and invisible nature of the industry all contribute to an environment in which worker exploitation, maltreatment and injustice continue unabated.

### **Recommendations for Reform**

Both top-down and bottom-up reform is necessary to address the systematic worker rights violations that these workers face. Specific recommendations for change include:

- Pine straw should become a registered forest product.
- H-2B visa holders should be under the same regulations as H-2A visa holders.
- A separate guest worker H-2 labor classification for forest workers should be considered.
- The large companies that contract out for their labor force should be subject to greater regulatory pressure to insure that all laws and protections applicable to workers rights are adhered to.
- The plight of undocumented workers is in dire need of intervention and advocacy.

A copy of the report can be downloaded at the Forest Guild website:  
**[www.forestguild.org/Latinoforestworkers.html](http://www.forestguild.org/Latinoforestworkers.html)**

### **Background Information**

**The Forest Guild** ([www.forestguild.org](http://www.forestguild.org)) is a national association of professional foresters and associated resource professionals whose mission is to promote ecologically, economically, and socially responsible forestry – excellent forestry – as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities which depend upon them. The Guild provides training, policy analysis and research to foster a broader community in meeting the challenges of forest conservation and management. The Guild is headquartered in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with regional offices in Massachusetts and California.

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