

Mexican forest labor probe stretches into EDC

By Denny Walsh and Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

For the 30 or 40 Mexican laborers looking for work, the pitch seemed too good to be true.

They would receive temporary work visas to get into the United States, then be driven to Northern California forests to trim trees at \$16.47 an hour.

The jobs would include rent-free accommodations in trailers at the work sites, where they would be protected from the elements and fed during their 40-hour workweeks. They then would be transported back to Mexico after nine months of tree trimming.

The alleged, 2-year-old agreement between the workers in Hidalgo, Mexico, and an Oakley, Idaho, firm called Pure Forest LLP is outlined in federal court documents filed in Sacramento and unsealed Tuesday.

The documents – search warrant affidavits compiled by investigators from the departments of Homeland Security and Labor – reveal a criminal probe unearthing evidence that the men allegedly ended up as virtual prisoners in forests north of Sacramento, where authorities contend they were forced to work seven days a week, sleep in tents on the ground, subsist on rotten food for which they were charged as much as \$120 a week, and left to drink tainted water from a nearby creek.

When the workers complained about conditions, foremen for Pure Forest, who were allegedly armed with pistols, “threatened to shoot workers in the head and leave them in the woods if they did not work harder,” according to one affidavit filed in federal court in February and unsealed this week.

Lawyers for the owners of Pure Forest sharply dispute the allegations, saying they are untrue, came from “a few disgruntled former employees” and ballooned into a federal probe in which the company is cooperating.

Authorities have executed search warrants for a residence in Garden Valley in El Dorado County and a Yahoo email account tied to Pure Forest. The documents indicate that investigators are looking into possible violations of federal laws against forced labor, trafficking via fraud, mail fraud, wire fraud, and fraudulent foreign labor contracting.

At a campsite in El Dorado County, the affidavit says workers recalled that they were working for Owen Wadsworth, who provided little food for them.

“Due to a lack of food, the workers went fishing in a nearby river, but Owen Wadsworth advised them that they could get fined for fishing without a license,” according to the affidavit.

The Wadsworths’ attorneys contend such claims are fantasy.

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