
HUCKLEBERRIES



Ramón Z. Wild Huckleberry Harvester, Medicinal Herb Farmworker

session/transport permit.” You have to fill this out and it goes to the assessor’s office, signed off by the sheriff, signed off by the landowner. It’s \$5 in Mason County Everywhere else it’s free.

At the beginning of this year, 1999, Latino harvesters were going into the Forest Service office to get legal permits to harvest legally on public land. They walk in the front door and get their permit, walk out that door and get busted by the INS and deported. That has created very bad public relations, to say the least.

I know two of the Latino harvesters who were deported. One of them, it took \$1900 and two or three weeks to get back home to his wife and children. Their families are here. What happened to the families while the bread-winner gone? It was just bad. And it’s still really fresh on people’s minds, even though it’s been a year. I’m not sure what’s going to happen with people and permits—which leaves the situation open to “illegal harvesting.”

Harvesters in general are low-income. I myself didn’t graduate high school. So this was one way for me as an under-educated person to do something to make money. Many people cannot speak English or even read their own language of origin, which creates another barrier.

Hopefully through the Alliance, harvesters will be writing up our own papers, our own viewpoints. Harvesters want a place in the decision-making process. Harvesters in general, they feel like they are powerless. They are “just” harvesters. You get dirty and wet and low-paid and all this. But I think we need public education, so when people go to the florist and you look at that baby’s breath—look past the roses—look at the background, the sword fern or the bracken fern or the salal or the other products inside that bunch of flowers. Look at that. Who harvested that? The people who harvest that baby’s breath are the invisible workforce.

What I’d like to see are options all up and down the spectrum of the issues that affect the communities and people who work with and harvest NTFPs. I’d like to see if a coop works or doesn’t work. I’d like to see people become involved in the legislative process. I’d like to see more people getting involved in expressing their concerns in their own language. I’d like to see an equal, open dialogue for everyone.

I’m from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. I left there in April of 1991. My three children, my wife, and I all left together. We had never been to the United States before. I decided to leave for economic reasons. When I got married and had my first and second child we were living with my mother-in-law. After the third child it was more difficult because the house was too small and we had to rent a house for the first time because I don’t have my own house. After that it wasn’t the same.

My sister had been here since 1980. She told me to come here and check things out. My wife was afraid I would leave her and not send any money home. We decided to all go together.

I’ve been working in agriculture mostly. In the fruit orchards, vegetable farms and right now I’m working with medicinal plants on a ranch. There are about fifty or sixty of us working in the fields. All of us are Latinos, including the crew manager. The owner is American. In the field it is all Latinos. In the office, Americans. Mechanics are Americans.

Around here, many also go and pick huckleberry [fruit]. I don’t usually go to harvest huckleberry except on Sundays. But my wife and kids go. Also, there is work planting pines which I have worked in. I planted, I burned piles, and I collected piles of brush. I also worked in another area where we planted Christmas trees. I cut them and packed them to sell. There are a lot of people who work in the woods here. There are some who pick mushrooms, too. The other thing they do is to cut branches to do things for Christmas.

Families do the huckleberry harvest. It is easy to do except that it takes a long time to get up into the mountains to harvest. My wife harvests three gallons a day, sometimes four. She is good at it. My oldest kid can harvest about one gallon. I harvest about three. All of us might get seven to eight gallons, which are selling, at the cheapest, for \$10 per gallon. You go down the highway and you’ll see areas where it says, “We buy huckleberries.” You go there and the buy-

ers choose what they want. If they don’t want them there, you can go to a store or a gas station where they also buy them. There are various areas and each person has their price.

There is a lot of competition in this because although it’s only two months, if you go to work in the harvest you can earn up to \$100 or \$130 or \$160 per day. There are people who have other work and leave to harvest as soon as they finish work. The people who dedicate themselves to only harvesting earn more. Harvesting each year helps the whole family, and because of this a lot of people go.

There are a lot of activities in the forest and it would be good to provide some training so people could continue to come. If the Forest Service gives more importance to the harvest, and puts more protections on the harvest, we’ll have to stop harvesting. The huckleberry is a natural part of the forest. They are plants that grow wild. They aren’t managed, so why can’t they be free? Except the Indian lands. You shouldn’t pick there because that’s their area—I’m not sure what the agreement is. Their land is more cared for. They also sell the berries, and they care for their plants.

As you go farther into the woods, that’s where the potential for danger exists, like the rape of women working alone, or children getting lost or falling, or animal bites. Various accidents can occur because it’s a dangerous zone. People work alone. The risks are your own responsibility. If I go deep into the forest there is the possibility that I get hurt. Each person is in charge of his family. Each person knows the risk they take.

There are some things that are missing, but you also have to think that if we have them the

Forest Service is going to have more control. In the case they charge more for the permits, it would be good for them to provide insurance, either individual or for the family. But also if they provide insurance they are going to have more laws and rules.

There was one year when we could not harvest because the year had been so bad with a lot of snow and the crop was ruined. That year hardly anyone went to harvest. Last year it was hot and was one of the best years. There was high production. Another thing the Forest Service could do is not charge us the same, because each year is different. People aren't going to stop coming. They are going to come each year and the risks are going to all fall on them each day.

Rogelio S. Wild Huckleberry Harvester, Farmworker

I wanted what everyone wants, to come and help our families, our parents, and like always to buy a home for when we get married. I'm from Jalisco, Mexico. I left Jalisco in 1980 to live and to work, to be paid enough to be able to have a family. I was 17 when I left. I left with an aunt, not knowing anything. We had never left Jalisco. It was a new adventure. We hid in trucks and arrived to Chicago. It was a long trip that lasted a week. I worked in Chicago until 1983. It was an office that they called whenever someone needed a job done.

Later I moved to California for a few months to work in agriculture but I didn't like it. There they exploit you without trying to hide it. The work is work like any other, but I didn't like how they treated us. There were a lot of coincidences where the INS arrived. You have to start to wonder why they don't come during the regular work time instead of always one or two days before payday. So my cousin came through and told me to go to harvest in Oregon. And that's how I came to this area and I haven't left. It is a lot of work and very tiring but that's why we came, to work.

I arrived here in 1984 and started working temporarily with a vegetable farm. In between I worked in whatever I could. I got the work permit in 1986. About nine years ago I started collecting forest products. For many years I did not know about the huckleberry harvest. I went with some friends to harvest off of Forest Service land. We've been doing that for many years along with neighbors and many people.

I had a friend who was harvesting mushrooms and he invited me to go along. But I don't go very often to do that. They pay us per pound. When the mid-season comes, out of eight or nine mushrooms they only buy one pound. So when the season starts we have to work as much as possible to get some money to cover the costs. Sometimes we don't even get enough to pay for the gas it takes to get our trucks up there to the mountains. Sometimes as the quality lowers and the price lowers, you don't make any money.

There have been a lot of changes since I first arrived. Somewhere around 1993 the Forest Service started to ask for permits. There are signs on the highways that said permits are required to pick anything.

Also, when I arrived there weren't many Latinos in the area. The community has grown a lot. All are very good workers in all areas. Now we are listened to more. There are people who like to listen to us and support us. The support of others working in the forest makes the work better. You don't feel exploited nor exploit others. You can just work and give what you can to your work.



In reality this town is small. The people who come, come to work in the seasonal work like the majority of us. What's missing is an orientation for the people so they can work in the mountains. There is a lot of huckleberry. The farther one walks, the more you find. But there are people who don't know the area and don't know how to work in forests. They don't know how to figure out what area they are in. It's not a light thing to get lost in the mountains. It is very serious.

When I go to cut firewood they charge me \$20, \$25 to get a permit. So, since we have to pay, there should be some type of insurance. What happens if you get hit by a branch and get so injured that you can no longer work? We are left with nothing, not even help from unemployment. This example is about firewood but it applies to forest work like huckleberry, mushrooms, and everything else. My suggestion is that we all continue working together and in the future we can organize something like insurance to be a little more protected. With more protection we'll be happy to work and they can charge what they charge for the permits.

One change we would like is to receive more information on how to live with more security, to know what is happening so we can avoid walking into something that could cause problems. Currently, if you are Mexican or look Hispanic, the INS will investigate you and deport you. A change could be that if we are going to be seasonal harvesters of mushrooms and huckleberries or whatever, it could be possible to have someone talk to us about creating laws that would protect us with a simple card saying you are a forest worker and it protects you.

In reality I don't have many goals in my work, just work, receive my pay. My hopes are that we can live a little better, be more united, and that all are better listened to. For these reasons it's very important to attend meetings. I don't want anyone to stop us or block us from doing the work we've done each year. So we are gathering information to be prepared for all this. To be able to continue working and to be able to work with the Forest Service and have some protections. That would be good for all the communities, Latinos and others who work in the brush, huckleberry, and mushrooms.