

***Rural Livelihoods and Commodity Chains:
An Analysis of Pine Straw in a Southeast Georgia Community***

Vanessa Casanova, Auburn University
Andrea Cruz, Southeast Georgia Communities Project, Inc.

The southeastern U.S. has seen significant increases in their Hispanic¹ populations as workers have sought out employment opportunities beyond historical migrant gateways such as California, Texas, and Florida. Recent studies indicate that the rate of increase of Hispanics in rural areas exceeds that of Hispanic population growth in metropolitan regions (Kandel and Parrado 2004). States like Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina have seen their rural Hispanic populations increase at a level beyond 300% in the ten years between 1990 and 2000. Kandel and Cromartie (2004) attribute this increase to 1) saturated labor markets in urban gateway areas such as Houston or Los Angeles, 2) dispersal of migrants away from states along the Mexican border resulting from increased border enforcement, and 3) employer recruitment from nontraditional, rural areas.

The South is no stranger to migrant workers. It has seen its share of Hispanic migrant farm workers, who for years have transited through the Southeast harvesting oranges, tomatoes, potatoes and sweet Vidalia onions. In recent years, the region has experienced a wave of settled-out migrants who have established roots working in such industries as poultry production, carpet manufacturing and forestry (Hernandez-Leon and Zuniga 2000, Kandel and Parrado 2004, Casanova and McDaniel 2005). The changing ethnic composition of rural areas, coupled with restructuring of particular industries has led to changing labor markets within particular sectors of forestry. The forest products industry in the Southeast is integrating large numbers of Hispanic workers into various sectors. Hispanics are employed in logging and millwork operations throughout Alabama. Hispanic workers, whether immigrant, undocumented or H2-B guest workers, now dominate the forest management sector where they perform the majority of tree planting and herbicide application. Guest worker programs are now seen as potential points of entry for migrants to other industries in forestry. More recently, research throughout the Southeast provides evidence of growing participation of Latino workers in the gathering and harvesting of non-timber forest products such as Christmas trees, galax, pinecones and more significant to this study, pine straw or pine needles (Hamilton 2004, Emery et al. forthcoming, Cruz 2004).

Pine straw harvesting has become a key component in the livelihood strategies of Hispanic migrants and immigrants in southeast Georgia. In and around Toombs County, it is estimated that thousands of Latino men and women are engaged in the gathering of straw, which is popular for use in landscaping and among building contractors. Pine straw harvesters are a crucial link in this non-timber forest product commodity chain as they are what turn longleaf litter-fall into a packaged, sellable item. Pine straw generates millions of dollars of income for forest landowners in states across the Southeast. For the Latino harvester, it represents a source of income that either replaces or supplements income from the harvesting of agricultural crops.

¹ Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably.