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NEWS

Feds 'tightening the screws' as farm labour crunch grows

By [Kelsey Johnson](https://ipolitics.ca/author/kelsey-johnson/) (<https://ipolitics.ca/author/kelsey-johnson/>). Published on Mar 14, 2018 4:14pm



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Latest News

Canadian fruit and vegetable growers who employ foreign workers say they're the target of a federal government "witch hunt" that is jeopardizing the future of this country's farms and causing many producers extreme stress.

"You're guilty until proven innocent and you're never told what you're guilty of," a visibly emotional Murray Porteous told delegates at the Canadian Horticulture Council's annual meeting in Ottawa on Wednesday. That system was modelled "after the 1692 and 1693 Salem witch hunts."

"They didn't work then," he said noting "things are as bad as they can get."

Porteous is a member of the Ontario-based Norfolk County Fruit Growers and owns Lingwood Farms, a family-owned fruit and vegetable operation that grows 750 acres of apples, sour cherries and pears as well as 100 acres of asparagus.

In 2017, he was subjected to an integrity audit regarding his foreign workers by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). His farm employed 58 foreign workers from March to the end of October.

Canadian fruit and vegetable growers say they are increasingly frustrated with how ESDC is handling applications for workers under the Seasonal Agriculture Worker Program. In place since 1966, the program is designed to provide short term labour on Canadian farms during peak planting and harvest seasons. Farms can apply for workers from Mexico and select Caribbean countries.

More than 20,000 seasonal workers travelled to Canadian farms in 2006 to help plant, tend and harvest.

"They're actually scaring us now (saying) that some of us won't have workers. You cannot plan a multi-million dollar farm...on a month-by-month basis," said Ken Forth, a broccoli producer who sits as a director on the Canadian Agriculture Human Resource Council (CAHRC).

All producers want is a "common sense approach" to the file, he said Wednesday afternoon. "If there's bad people in there, we want them out. Right now, it seems to me, that we're all considered bad and they're tightening the screws."

Earlier in the day, Forth accused ESDC of acting "unCanadian," citing how the experience affected Porteous.

"You folks have seen how it has affected him. You've seen how it affected him today." He urged producers to push back. He said he's all for audits "but you can't affect a man like this. You just can't."

A CAHRC survey conducted in December 2017 of 548 producers who use the Seasonal Agriculture Worker Program found 29 per cent of respondents had been placed under audit, with some respondents reporting having suicidal thoughts because of the stress caused.

In Porteous' case, ESDC initiated an audit of Lingwood farms in October 2017 — three months after the Canadian Horticulture Council had invited officials from ESDC, Immigration Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to tour fruit and vegetable farms that rely on foreign workers.



(https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/03/26/province-urged-to-overhaul-flawed-approach-to-funding-education.html?google_editors_picks=true)

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Fred Gorrell, a senior official with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada agreed, noting many sectors are struggling to find workers. In his personal opinion, "I think the labour issue is going to be a key problem that is going to keep coming forward."

Finding a fix to the problem isn't a simple task, he said. "I don't think it's an easy solution."

Meanwhile, the industry has been flagged by the federal government as a potential growth market, with Budget 2017 challenging the industry to grow their exports to \$75 billion by 2025.

Canadian farm jobs are also critical sources of employment for foreign workers — many of whom use their wages earned on farm to support families back home.

One of his workers, Porteous said, is a Jamaican man named Kevin Thomas. "Kevin is a joker in the group," he told the group. "He's got 11 kids, scattered about. He's got three sets of twins and he's got a five-year old son who's got sickle cell anemia. And he says 'I want the minister to know that if I don't have this job, that boy dies.'"

Thomas' son's medication costs \$500 a month.

The use of foreign workers on Canadian farms has been under increased public and political scrutiny in recent years. The federal government **tightened housing rules** (<https://www.manitobacooperator.ca/daily/ottawa-tightens-rules-on-housing-foreign-farm-workers>) for foreign workers on farms in January.

Budget 2018 included \$194.1 million over five years, with an additional \$33.19 million promised every year after that "to ensure the rights of temporary foreign workers in Canada are protected and enforced through a robust compliance regime."

ESDC is also conducting a review of the Primary Agriculture Worker stream of the Temporary Foreign Worker program.

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4 comments on "Feds 'tightening the screws' as farm labour crunch grows"



Marshall Schuyler says:

March 15, 2018 at 9:00 am (<https://ipolitics.ca/2018/03/14/feds-tightening-the-screws-as-farm-labour-crunch-grows/#comment-72341>)

ESDC in their misguided efforts to protect workers are trampling on the rights of employers. If there are employers who are mistreating their workers go after them but leave the vast majority of good employers alone.