



London

## Canada lifts restrictions on foreign workers, including migrant farm labourers

Ontario employs up to 20,000 migrant workers a year to perform farm work

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Canada's agricultural sector relies on about 60,000 temporary foreign workers annually. (Emilie Richard/Radio-Canada)

The Canadian government has lifted travel restrictions on temporary foreign workers who many farmers say are the backbone of the country's agricultural industry.

On Saturday, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food said the horticultural industry, lead by Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services (FARMS), will charter and pay for planes to bring workers into the country.

Farmers will have to adhere to strict two-week isolation rules or risk forfeiting their right to bring in foreign workers in the future, the ministry said.

Canadian farmers from coast to coast rely on the workers for everything from planting to harvesting, and are worried that bans put in place as part of the federal government's attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19 could lead to a crisis for the industry.

Although details are still being worked out, the federal government on Friday announced that exemptions will be made for seasonal agricultural workers, fish and seafood workers, caregivers, and all other temporary foreign workers.

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"Farmers are pleased to see the government respond so promptly to the looming shortage of agri-food workers and we are committed to working with all the appropriate agencies and departments to ensure their entry maintains strict public health protocols to prevent further spread of COVID-19," Mary Robinson, president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, said in a statement.

Under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SWAP), labourers come to Canada from Mexico and Caribbean countries through an agreement between the Canadian government and the countries that supply workers.

Ontario employs up to 20,000 migrant workers a year to perform farm work throughout the growing season. The number nationwide is close to 60,000.

Asparagus farmers are particularly under the gun, because that vegetable is typically harvested in May and growers say they need workers on site by early April for prep work and training.

"This is a huge first step," said Keith Currie, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. "By nature, farms are isolated, so that is a plus for us."

The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association said it was "extremely relieved" by the lifting of the travel restrictions.

## Safety precautions in place

Last week the federal government announced the Canada-U.S. border would be shut to non-essential travel, and exemptions were granted to workers who enter through the United States. The bulk of temporary foreign workers come from other countries.



Farmworkers pick strawberries at a farm in British Columbia. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)

Although those exemptions have now been further expanded, Ottawa is urging workers not to travel to Canada immediately. Details will emerge early next week, officials said, and all those coming in will be required to self-isolate for two weeks upon their arrival in Canada.

The travel exemptions also include international students who held a valid study permit or had been approved for a study permit when the travel restrictions took effect on March 18, and

permanent resident applicants who had been approved before the travel restrictions were announced on March 16 but who had not yet travelled to Canada.

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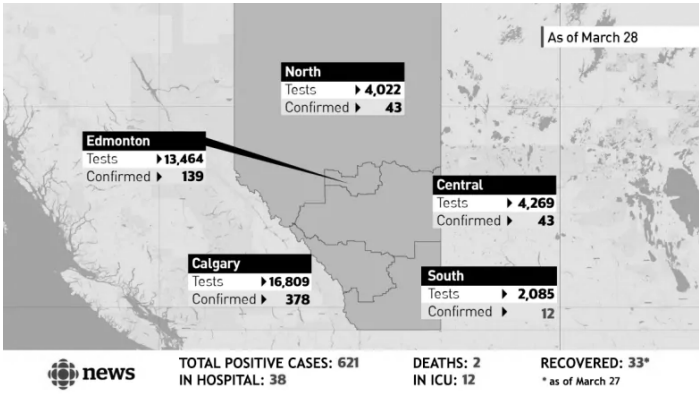
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