



## CHALET DES ÉRABLES

La cabane à sucre la plus amusante avec son Village des Sucres !

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

September 25, 2012

## Exploitation of seasonal migrant workers feared by unions

By WENDY STUECK

*Unions' attempt to recruit local workers fails, BC Fruit Growers Association says migrant workers essential to industry*

For the past seven years, Jose Guadalupe has come from Durango, Mexico to work at Cedar Rim nursery, a family-owned business in the Fraser Valley.

Mr. Guadalupe, who has picked up English in his time at Cedar Rim, didn't know anything about cedars or Japanese maples when he arrived. Now he looks at home amid the trees and shrubs that line the company's greenhouses.

"This is a good job for me and my family," Mr. Guadalupe said earlier this month at the nursery, adding that he hopes one day to become a permanent resident of Canada and have his family join him.

Like Mr. Guadalupe, thousands of migrant workers come to work in B.C. each year, drawn by steady employment and wages that are difficult to find in their home countries. Since Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program was expanded to B.C. in 2004, vineyard, greenhouse and orchard operators have embraced the program, hiring anywhere from half a dozen to more than 200 workers each year to plant, pick and process their crops. Migrant workers also come to the province through other programs. The influx has added an undercurrent of tension to a sector already grappling with economic and social change.

That tension can be seen on the labour front, where unions have attempted to organize B.C. farm workers, so far with limited success. Last year, Local 1518 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union filed a complaint with the BC Labour Relations Board, alleging that the Mexican government and its Vancouver consulate had blacklisted Mexican workers for union activities.

In a recent interview, Mexican vice-consul Edgar Furtado rejected those allegations, insisting that Mexico recognizes workers' rights to organize. The case remains before the LRB.

This summer, meanwhile, Lucy Luna, an advocate with the UFCW-backed Agricultural Workers Alliance, helped organize union drives at two farm sites in the Okanagan.

At both sites, enough workers signed cards to hit a 45 per cent threshold required by B.C. labour laws. The union lost both certification votes – results that Ms. Luna chalks up to a 10-day window between union signup and certification vote.

Union activists maintain that period can give employers time to harass or intimidate employees, although such actions are forbidden by labour law.

Employers' groups, meanwhile, say the union model is ill-suited for agriculture, in which the work is seasonal and driven by harvesting conditions.

In a recent report on migrant workers, the Toronto-based Metcalf Foundation pointed to Manitoba's Worker Recruitment and Protection Act, passed in 2008, as a model that builds in safeguards – including prohibiting the charging of fees by recruiters – and registers employers who hire migrant workers.

In B.C., provincial authorities, employers and the Mexican consulate – which has expressed concerns about housing provided for some workers under the program – are expected to meet this month to discuss the program.

"This program is critical to our industry," said Glen Lucas, general manager of the BC Fruit Growers' Association., which represents 800 growers in the province.

One of those is Dave Geen, who runs a labour-intensive operation that, at peak harvesting time, employs more than 200 migrant workers.

"Without the foreign worker program, we had a difficult time getting our crop picked and processed," Mr. Geen said in Kelowna, as workers pruned cherry trees nearby. "We could typically find enough Canadian workers to pick the fruit but getting it packed, getting it sorted and getting it shipped to market was always a big challenge for us."

The Globe and Mail, Inc.



The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.  
You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing [http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx\\_id=4565970](http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=4565970) into any web browser. The Globe and Mail, Inc. and The Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of The Globe and Mail, Inc. The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.