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## Billionaire Aquilini family shortchanged migrant workers, B.C. government rules



\$133K owed to Guatemalan berry workers, says ruling

[Paisley Woodward](#) • CBC News • Posted: May 16, 2019 6:02 PM PT | Last Updated: May 17



The Aquilini family has been ordered to reimburse 174 migrant workers \$133,000 in unpaid wages. (Martin Diotte/CBC)

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A branch of the B.C. government has found the billionaire Aquilini family — which own the NHL's Vancouver Canucks — underpaid 174 migrant workers at their berry farm in Pitt Meadows last summer.

The office of the Director of Employment Standards ordered the Aquilinis — reported to be among the top 30 of richest Canadian families — to repay \$133,632.56 in back wages, vacation pay and interest to temporary foreign workers brought in from Guatemala to work at its Golden Eagle Blueberry Farm last summer.



Francesco Aquilini, centre, alongside his brothers Roberto, left and Paolo in 2008. In 2018 the family was reported to have a net worth of \$3.3 billion (Richard Lam/The Canadian Press)

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The decision is the latest in a series of problems uncovered facing workers at the family's berry farm operation.

## **Wages 'misrepresented'**

The director found that the employees were promised 40 hours of work a week under their written employment contracts. That promise wasn't honoured, with the Director ruling the Aquilinis "misrepresented" the wages to be paid, breaching the Employment Standards Act.

The workers at the farm were paid \$11.35 an hour.

The Director of Employment Standards enforces the Employment Standards Act and regulations, which set minimum standards for wages and working conditions in most B.C. workplaces.

According to the B.C. Ministry of Labour, the repayments to the workers ranged from \$10.02 to \$1,943.27.

In addition to the back wages, Employment Standards fined the family \$500 for breaking the law.

## **Golden Eagle accepts decision**

Golden Eagle Farms told CBC News in a statement Thursday evening that the employment contract for the Guatemalans was new and unique, and it accepts the ruling.

It says it has already paid out the wages owing, and is proud of its long history supporting and employing foreign workers.

Naz Mitha, a lawyer for the Aquilini Group, who represented the family at the Employment Standards hearing, told CBC the employees were paid for every hour they worked. He pointed out the legal issue was whether, by contract, the employees had been promised forty hours of work per week when they came to the farm. The Tribunal ruled they had.





The Aquilini Golden Eagle Berry Farm Group runs large blueberry and cranberry operations in Pitt Meadows, B.C. (Martin Diotte/CBC)

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## 'It's disgusting'

B.C. Federation of Labour President Laird Cronk said he was disturbed by the situation facing workers at the farm.

"It's despicable when you have employers with this kind of wealth not providing the absolute basics" under employment standards rules, Cronk said.

"I don't think it is going to make much of an impact on that family" he said. "It's disgusting."

## Numerous complaints

After receiving numerous complaints about working conditions at the farm last summer, the Employment Standards Branch reviewed payments for all employees at Golden Eagle for the 2018 growing season, investigating approximately 375 payrolls.

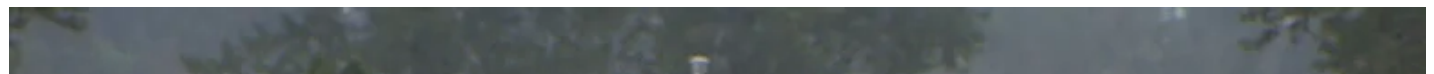
The Aquilinis' Golden Eagle Farm Group operates a giant blueberry and cranberry operation in Pitt Meadows of approximately 2,000 hectares.

## Second penalty this month

It's the second time this month regulators have cited the Aquilinis for problems at the farm. WorkSafeBC penalized the family \$53,690 for operating an unsafe 21-year-old bus with mechanical problems May 6.

- [Vancouver Canucks owners fined again for unsafe farm vehicle at family berry operation](#)

CBC News also revealed WorkSafeBC cited the operation for 41 health and safety violations in the last four years.







The Aquilini family was penalized by WorkSafeBC for mechanical problems with a farmworker transport bus in 2018. (Martin Diotte/CBC)

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Trouble with the Aquilini's berry farm dates back several years. [In 2011 and 2012, Golden Eagle was penalized for \\$250,000 in fines by Worksafe for health and safety violations](#) — including two times for operating unsafe vehicles to transport workers

Canadian Business Magazine listed the Aquilini family as the 27th richest family in Canada for 2018, with a net worth of \$3.3 billion.

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