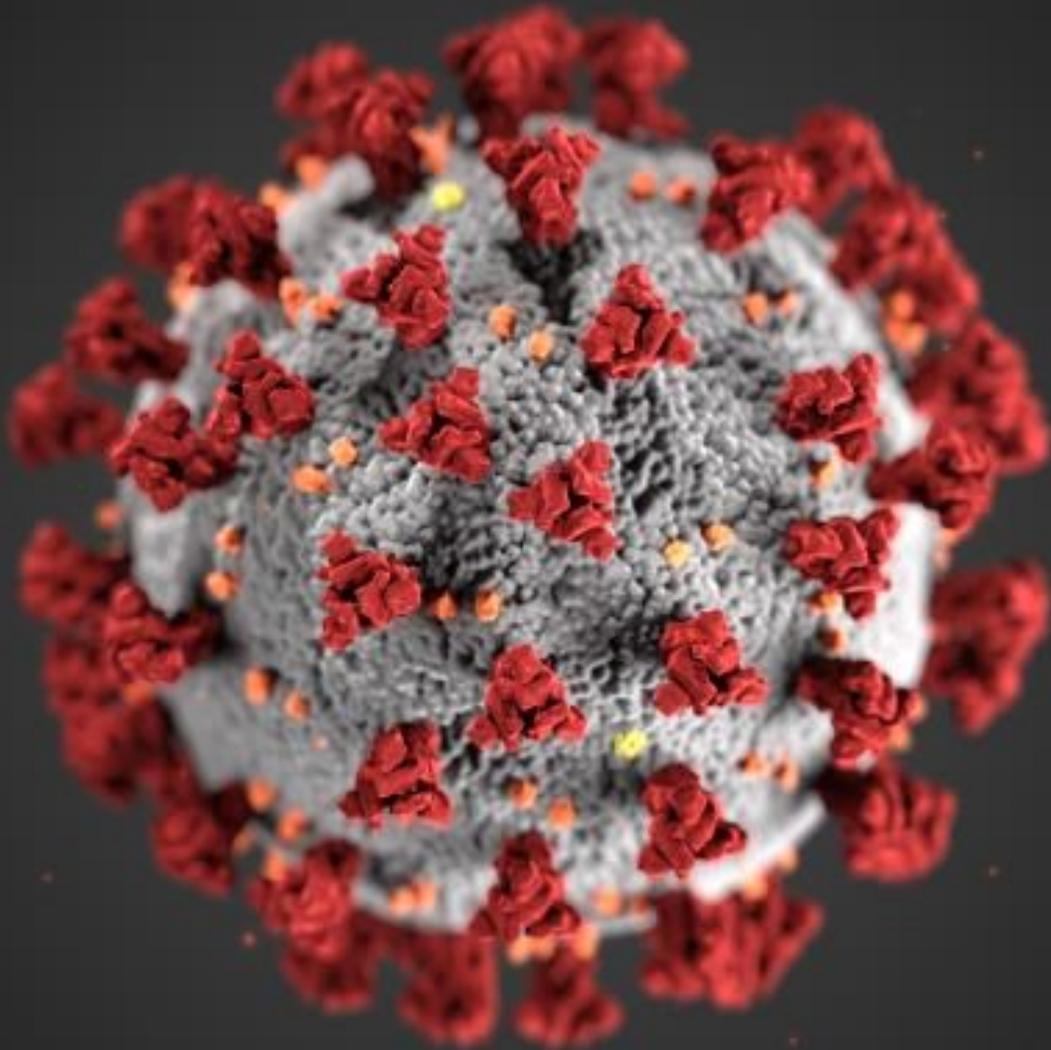


Response to COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impacts



Social Impacts



Government COVID-19 guidelines gamble on the lives of migrant agricultural workers



Dr. C. Susana Caxaj, PhD, Assistant Professor, Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, Western University

Dr. Amy Cohen, Professor, Anthropology Department, Okanagan College

Carlos Colindres, Independent Public Health Emergency Consultant Complex Health, Disaster and Emergency Management Consulting Group

Natalie Drolet, Executive Director/Staff Lawyer, Migrant Workers Centre BC

Jenna L Hennebry, PhD, Associate Professor, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University

Janet McLaughlin, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Wilfrid Laurier University

Government must regulate accordingly or cancel the entry of additional workers.

Recently published federal government guidelines put too much responsibility on employers to protect the health and safety of migrant agricultural workers during this unprecedented pandemic. Adequate oversight, clear standards, and enhanced coordination with public health are needed to keep workers and the public safe. In the absence of these measures, further entry of this workforce into the country should be put on pause.

Over 69,000 temporary migrant agricultural workers came to Canada in 2019. Central to Canada's food supply, these workers come from Mexico, the Caribbean and many other countries under specific migrant worker programs. Despite the announcement of border restrictions in mid-March, the prime minister announced that some Temporary Foreign Workers would be allowed entry. The exemption took effect March 26th.

The next day, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the agency that oversees the program, published Covid-19 guidelines outlining expectations for employers of migrant workers.

These guidelines fall short, leaving too much to the discretion of employers. They also fail to outline strong regulatory measures necessary to protect workers and the public during this unprecedented crisis.

Employers are tasked with ensuring that newly-arriving worker cohorts can self-isolate, and that social distancing be observed. Yet employers are not required to prove that they have appropriate housing in place to do this. No specific or concrete expectations are provided in terms of the maximum number of workers per handwashing station, washroom, or bedroom. If we have any chance of providing safe homes and workplaces for migrant agricultural workers, the federal government must regulate accommodation and sanitation measures to ensure this highly

infectious disease is not transmitted among workers.

Federal agents can also work with local health authorities to ensure adherence to these standards both before and during workers' time in Canada. This is necessary to ensure that employers have provided adequate housing and other practices to ensure distancing between workers. Without proof of these requirements, employers should be prohibited from hiring migrant workers this season.

Barriers that have always existed for migrant workers to seek help and medical care are now exacerbated by the current pandemic.

Communication between workers and their bosses can be challenging for many migrant agricultural workers because they may not speak English. It also can be intimidating to report symptoms to an employer who can decide both the future of these workers' livelihoods as well as their ability to stay in the country. The Government of Canada must provide direct lines of communication with workers, not mediated by employers and in their preferred languages so that they can report unsafe conditions that expose them to COVID-19 transmission.

ESDC's guidelines suggest that the 14 day self-isolation, access to medical care, and daily monitoring and documentation of this workforce's symptoms will all be the responsibility of the employer. Employers are not well positioned to fulfill this role. And workers often have unique cultural and language needs that

are best addressed by community and primary care agencies.

Because self-isolation measures intended to limit the risk of spread within households may be difficult to implement, workers should be tested within days of arrival to help mitigate the risk of transmission. The federal government must work closely to coordinate these medical services with health authorities and facilitate alternative housing and employment for workers if employers fail to cooperate with these practices.

It is important to send a clear message to migrant workers that we will take care of them if they become sick. If not, workers will be more reluctant to come forward if they experience symptoms. Through coordination of workers' access to Employment Insurance, Canadian Emergency Response Benefits or relevant wage subsidies when and if workers become ill, ESDC can play an essential role in protecting workers' lives and stopping the spread across Canadian communities.

In this current international crisis, we cannot go forward with further entry of migrant agricultural workers into Canada without strict regulatory measures that will keep workers safe. We have already started to see outbreaks on farms in BC and more are sure to follow. Canada must act now to mitigate risk and protect the lives of migrant workers and the broader communities in which they live and work.

