



Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group
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August 23, 2023

The Honourable Marc Miller
Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship
Government of Canada House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A7

Via email:

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Re: Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group - Interventions to support the health of BC migrant agricultural workers affected by wildfires

Dear Minister Miller,

Please accept this letter on behalf of the [Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group](#), a team of researchers, clinicians, and occupational health and infectious disease experts who specialize in migrant workers' support, health and rights. Our group was formed in March 2020 to address concerns for migrant agricultural worker health and safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, we have shared our expertise with numerous levels of government in Canada and migrant-sending countries on how to support the health and safety of agricultural workers hired through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

We are writing to express our deep concern for the well-being of migrant agricultural workers in British Columbia, which is currently experiencing over 380 active wildfires. An estimated 600 migrant agricultural workers have been evacuated because of wildfires in the Okanagan. Advocates report that some workers are stranded, having lost their jobs for the season and unable to return home due to air space closures. Meanwhile, other evacuated workers have been relocated to new farms in already-full farmworker housing, where they are expected to work amid an Air Quality Health Index Rating of 'very high risk.'

Thick, smoky air from wildfires can mean that the people growing the Okanagan's famous fresh fruit and wine grapes are inhaling PM_{2.5} particulates - these are fine particles that can be narrower than a strand of hair. When PM_{2.5} particulates travel to the lungs and the bloodstream, the resulting inflammation can exacerbate the risk of underlying heart and lung conditions such



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as asthma, while increasing the potential for a stroke or heart attack. Alongside health risks, these workers are experiencing heightened precarity and are more vulnerable to rights abuses.

We echo our colleagues at the Migrant Workers Centre of BC in urging the federal government to immediately:

1. **Issue emergency open work permits to all migrant agricultural workers in BC**
2. **Provide migrant agricultural workers impacted by the wildfires full access to Employment Insurance benefits during periods of work interruptions or unemployment**

Typically, migrant agricultural workers are hired under employer-specific work permits, which makes it exceedingly difficult to find a new employer in the context of displacement due to wildfires. A worker would need to find a new employer who is willing to submit a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), wait for the LMIA to be approved, and then seek an employer-specific work permit. Alternatively, a worker would need to request a transfer to another farm operator who is already approved to hire migrant workers this year, pending the approval of their previous employer, new employer, and sending-country representative. By contrast, open work permits would enable migrant workers who have been evacuated because of the wildfires to access alternative employment, including in regions where the Air Quality Health Index is safer.

Open work permits should be granted automatically instead of requiring affected workers to submit an application, which would be a significant barrier to workers who lack English-language proficiency and computer access. Open work permits for all migrant agricultural workers in BC would simplify administration and prevent further harm during a state of emergency. Second, permits should be granted without processing fees. Having to pay \$155 for a work permit fee and \$100 for an open work permit holder fee is not financially feasible for the migrant workers who have recently lost their jobs because of a wildfire. Third, the open work permits should be issued for a **period of at least twelve months**, which is consistent with IRCC's existing guidelines on [Open Work Permits for Vulnerable Workers](#), per [section 207.1](#) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (IRPR).

Beyond these immediate measures, we urge the federal government to establish open work permits for all migrant workers and confer permanent status on arrival. Likewise, given that migrant workers already make contributions to Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan, they should have full access to these benefits. We also recommend the federal government establish mandatory national housing standards for migrant agricultural workers that include provisions for healthy indoor air quality, ventilation and cooling, and reduced overcrowding, with accompanying random spot inspections to ensure compliance.



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We are grateful to you for responding swiftly and implementing these urgent interventions to support migrant members of our communities during a state of emergency in BC. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

The Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group

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