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Canada Recruits Workers From Mexico



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By *OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ*, Associated Press Writer

SALTILLO, Mexico - While the United States struggles to strike a balance between labor shortages and the illegal entrance of thousands of Mexican migrants, Canada is sending recruiters into the mountains and cities of Mexico in search of workers.

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More than 10,000 Mexicans work in Canada each year, mainly in the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and Manitoba.

The program was started to help fill worker shortages in agriculture, but has been so successful that Canadian officials are expanding it to urban, unemployed Mexicans who seek the low-skill jobs that Canadians don't want, in construction, the hotel industry and meatpacking plants.

Canada first allowed in foreign workers from the Caribbean in 1966 and eight years later some 200 Mexican laborers were hired. Today, about 5,000 Caribbean workers also participate, but Mexico contributes the highest number of migrants.

"This is a win-win situation," said Julian Anzaldua, of the Mexican Coahuila state employment service, which contracts guest workers. "Unfortunately, we don't have employment opportunities for many of our workers here, and in Canada they work with all the protections any Canadian worker would have."

To qualify, Mexican workers must be offered a job by a Canadian employer who can't find employees locally. The employer pays for transportation costs between Mexico City and Canada, and about a third of the costs are later deducted from the employee's wages.

Contracted migrants can work from six weeks to eight months, are guaranteed minimum wages, a 40-hour week and free housing, Anzaldua said.

A reliable pool of qualified workers has allowed the agricultural industry to expand, creating more job opportunities for foreign and domestic workers, said Dave Greenhill, senior policy adviser for Canada's Human Resources and Skill Development Department.

The program is similar to a proposal in the United States made this year by President Bush ([news - web sites](#)). Under his plan, which must be approved by Congress, Mexican workers with U.S. job offers could receive temporary visas if they can prove no Americans want to fill the jobs.

The U.S. Department of Labor already has a program that allows about 45,000 Mexicans to work legally in agriculture jobs every year, but critics say the immigration process is too cumbersome and expensive. Employers also say the number of workers allowed is not enough to meet labor shortages.

The U.S. government says an estimated 52 percent of agricultural workers are undocumented, but farm labor and industry groups estimate that number is closer to 85 percent.

Striking a balance between the agricultural industry's needs and security concerns after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack has proven difficult. While several bills proposing temporary worker programs have been introduced, all have faced opposition in Congress.

Critics of the Canadian program say foreign agricultural workers are denied basic rights, including overtime wages and claiming health and unemployment benefits they pay for. Michael Forman, a spokesman with Canada's United Food and Commercial Workers Union, said workers are not aware of their rights and many times are afraid to file a complaint against their employers.

"If they complain, they can find themselves on a plane back home," Forman said. "The whole game is loaded against them."

Greenhill denied the rights of workers are violated and said there is a great deal of oversight by Mexican and Canadian authorities built into the program to ensure Mexican workers benefit from it.

"To say workers can't collect unemployment or health insurance benefits is erroneous," Greenhill said. "There are a number of claims that have been made but I think the workers prefer to be fully employed than to have to collect (benefits)."

One worker, Jesus Rodriguez, who harvested tobacco in Quebec last year, said the program offers financial opportunities and peace of mind.

"You go there without fear because everyone there knows you're there legally," said Rodriguez, who has worked legally in farms in New York and North Dakota. "In the United States, people look at you differently. They look at you as an illegal even if you have your permit."

In Mexico, Rodriguez earns about \$500 per month working for a construction company as a carpenter and painter. In Canada, he's able to make twice as much.

Rodriguez plans to work at the same Canadian tobacco farm starting in July. While he likes the job, he said working on isolated farms and not having access to familiar food are drawbacks.

"The food in Quebec is tasteless, and it's hard to find chile or beans," he said. "But you know it won't be like that forever."

The Mexican government requires migrants be at least 25 years old, have experience in farm work and have families to support before they can leave for Canada.

Having workers with financial dependents — children, parents, brothers and sisters — helps ensure they will return, said Jaime Botello of Mexico's Labor Department ([news](#) - [web sites](#)).

"We have very few people who break their contracts, and about 80 percent of the workers who travel to Canada have already worked there," Botello said.

Of the more than 10,000 Mexican workers who worked in Canada in 2003, 780 broke their contracts. Most left for personal reasons or because there wasn't enough work, Botello said.

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