



## Report on B.C. farm workers' conditions describe unsafe work conditions

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VANCOUVER — For the past four years, Juan has come to British Columbia from Mexico every spring to work on a farm.

The 38-year-old, who didn't want his real name to be used, says he knew the money was better in Canada but the working conditions didn't meet the high standards he had expected.

Juan says he worked 14 hour days, seven days a week and was allowed just two days off a month.

He said his freedom was limited and he was housed in a trailer shared with 12 other people.

"It was a bad experience," said Juan, who came to Canada on an eight-month contract program that requires a minimum Grade 3 education. "It was very bad the conditions for the house; there was no hot water."

According to a study released Wednesday by labour groups, Juan's story is not unique. The report, "Cultivating Farm work Rights," paints a grim picture of B.C.'s agricultural industry.

Done in part by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and B.C. Federation of Labour, the study found that immigrant and migrant farm workers in B.C. lacked health facilities, were exposed to unsafe working conditions and were paid inadequate wages.

Co-author Mark Thompson said he was shocked by the findings.

"We could almost describe this as third world conditions right here in Canada," said Thompson, a professor at the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia.

The report, which interviewed 28 immigrant and 25 migrant workers, found the average wage for an immigrant farm worker was \$8.20 an hour.

It also found a lack of basic safety and hygiene.

The main complaint by immigrant workers who worked outside was the lack of sanitary facilities, such as bathrooms and running water, or a proper place to eat.

Workers also expressed safety concerns over exposure to pesticides and the vehicles that transport them to work.

In March 2007, three female farm workers were killed in a van accident near Abbotsford. The van's driver was taking 16 women to work at a Chilliwack, B.C., greenhouse.

A year later, B.C. Labour Minister Olga Ilich tabled legislation that allows the government to cancel or suspend a farm labour contractor's licence for safety violations.

The report makes several recommendations, including raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour and paying overtime and statutory holidays as well as ensuring adequate, safe and affordable housing.

The study found that housing currently offered to workers varies from adequate to "far below legal standards."

Adriana Paz, of the advocacy group Justicia for Migrant Workers, said out of all the provinces her group has surveyed, B.C.'s working conditions are the most appalling.

"It's worst in B.C. and I'm very amazed because the conditions in Ontario and Quebec are really bad," she said, adding that her group has a chapter in Ontario.

Ilich called the study "slanted."

She pointed out that the authors interviewed less than 100 farm workers, while inspectors from her ministry have talked to 3,000 in the last year.

Ilich said her ministry is doing more inspections and handing out more fines than they have in the past.

"We have rules, we have regulation, we have laws, we expect them to be adhered to. When they're not adhered to we give out fines," she said.

B.C. Federation of Labour president Jim Sinclair said the province has allowed lower standards for immigrant farm workers, "some of the most exploited people on the planet."

"Most people don't see the farm workers going to work, nor do they see them coming home," he said. "They are the invisible work force and as long as they're invisible then people and government will ignore them."