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Ottawa plans to streamline foreign worker programs

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

Ottawa announced new immigration initiatives Wednesday that it says will make it easier for employers in labour-strapped provinces like Alberta and British Columbia to hire foreign workers.

Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Monte Solberg announced the initiatives Wednesday morning in Edmonton. He said they would reduce the cost and expedite the process to hire foreign workers in the absence of local labour.

Both Alberta and B.C. have been experiencing labour shortages in the wake of the oil boom and ahead of the 2010 Olympics.

“Canada's new government has been listening to employers in Alberta and British Columbia, and they are truly having a hard time finding enough workers,” Mr. Solberg said in a statement Wednesday. “The improvements we are announcing today are making it easier, faster, and less costly for employers to hire temporary foreign workers.”

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Specifically, Ottawa plans to establish regional lists of occupations under pressure, which Mr. Solberg said would allow regional employers who face critical labour shortages to follow shorter, simpler and less costly advertising requirements to recruit the workers they need.

Ottawa will also provide a step-by-step guide developed specifically for employers who need to hire temporary foreign workers.

In addition, Mr. Solberg said he would create federal/provincial working groups to speed up the identification of existing and emerging skill shortages and determine the best way for foreign workers program to address these shortages.

The Minister said he hoped the changes would shave five weeks off a 19-week process to bring foreign workers in.

Union leaders have previously raised concerns that making it easier to bring in foreign workers would end up replacing high-paying jobs with foreign workers who might be willing to take less money.

“In Conservative-speak, ‘streamlining’ is shorthand for ‘let employers do what they want,’” said Alberta Federation of Labour president Gil McGowan. “The plans to make it easier for employers to bring in temporary foreign workers will lead to more abuses of the system. Employers will turn to foreign workers as an initial solution, rather than as a means of last resort.”

But both labour-strapped provinces said the plans were a step in the right direction.

“Alberta employers have been asking for clearer information and quicker processes for recruiting temporary foreign workers - these actions by the federal government are a good step in the right direction,” said Alberta's Minister of Human Resources and Employment Mike Cardinal. “While Albertans and Canadians will always be given priority, Alberta recognizes the importance of temporary foreign workers to help fill critical short term labour needs.”

British Columbia's Parliamentary Secretary for Multiculturalism and Immigration Dave Hayer said he welcomed the initiatives and said the province would continue to work with the federal government on other programs to help B.C. deal with its labour shortage.

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