

Migrant workers facing the dangers of wildfires need support, say researchers

August 31 2023, by Eloy Rivas-Sánchez and Geneviève Tousignant



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[Wildfires continue to burn across Canada](#), destroying hundreds of structures and displacing thousands of people. However, while many have been able to evacuate and receive help, migrant workers have been

coping with the effects of the fires with relatively little support.

Temporary [migrant workers](#) in the Global North are already highly vulnerable to abuse in the workplace and hazardous working conditions. That vulnerability is often drastically increased in times of crisis.

[Studies](#) have revealed how crises like COVID-19 impact migrant workers around the world, including in [Canada](#) and the [United States](#). Our research team has found that migrants have also been significantly affected by the recent [wildfires in British Columbia's Okanagan](#).

We are part of an ongoing research project looking into the ways COVID-19 affected migrant workers of precarious legal status called Collective Care, Renewal, and Resurgence for the Post-Pandemic Future: Learning from the Migrant Justice Movements in Rural Canada.

Shortly before the wildfires erupted, our research team was traveling across the Okanagan Valley meeting with migrant workers and interviewing [community organizations](#) and farmers. We were there to hear about the challenges that migrant workers in Canada faced during the COVID-19 crisis, and to document how those challenges have been addressed.

Poor working conditions

Migrant farm workers in the Okanagan valley shared the many challenges they face. Many workers in the region continue to deal with abusive employers who refuse to pay for worked hours and who continue to refuse to offer them basic health and safety protections in the workplace.

Migrant workers also reported bad and unhealthy housing conditions and major obstacles to accessing health care. Some also said they feared

reappraisal and dismissal if they refused the hazardous working conditions and strenuous days.

Many [temporary migrant workers](#) were classified as essential workers during the COVID-19 lockdowns and continued to work during the worst days of the pandemic. However, since lockdowns were lifted things have sadly just gone back to normal for many. As one worker we spoke to said,

"During the pandemic we were considered essential, and then we were given masks and some other protections in the workplace and in the house we live in. But now, when that moment is gone, we are all treated like we were in the past, or probably worse, as many of the places we work for are trying 'catch up,' and we are the ones doing the heavy work."

We were about to leave the region to continue our fieldwork in Vancouver when the wildfires in the region [reached West Kelowna](#). As the crisis was unfolding, we reached out to the migrant workers we had interviewed a few days before the wildfires. We wanted to know how they were doing, what their needs were and to offer them support.

Some migrants reported receiving support. For example, some temporary foreign workers from Mexico said they were given masks in some farms to avoid being affected by the heavy smoke, as well as being asked to pause the work and remain in the house they were assigned as protective measures.

Local community organizations quickly assisted those who had been evacuated, and provided support (food, housing, groceries) to the approximately [more than 600 migrant workers](#).

We also heard from migrant workers with precarious legal status that

they were receiving support from the emergency response programs set in place by local authorities regardless of their legal status.

Javier Robles, a community organizer with KCR Community Resources in Kelowna, said of the migrant workers:

"They are the backbone of our economy. Vineyards, fruit and vegetable farms in the Okanagan Valley would not run without the work provided by the migrants who come here every year to plant and harvest the fruits and vegetables we eat and export to the world. They are also part of our society. Why would we not provide help whatever their legal status is?"

Unfair immigration policies

The vulnerability of the migrant workers in Canada is directly linked to the immigration program through which they are hired, which provide them few legal protections and rights.

Most migrant workers in the Okanagan come through the Temporary Foreign Worker program. The program allows workers to come to Canada with a closed work permit, meaning they are not allowed to change employers. This means that employers can have significant, and often detrimental, control over the lives and well-being of their workers.

Despite the examples of support some workers had during the [wildfires](#), [most of the workers our research team spoke to](#) reported challenges:

1. Many workers have reported not receiving masks or any other equipment to protect them from the bad air quality.
2. Most workers said they were not given breaks to rest from the harsh outdoor and smoky conditions. They reported that even with [sore throats](#), difficulty breathing and, in some cases for older workers, fainting, lots of employers ignored their demands

to have breaks. In many cases, when they are allowed more breaks, the time was deducted from their salary.

3. Several workers said they asked for shorter work days, longer breaks and easier access to fresh water. But all those requests were denied. Workers who persisted in their requests had their work days cut. Others were threatened with not having their contract renewed.
4. [Some workers said they had not been paid for weeks](#), and were dismissed from the workplace without pay and with no explanation during the wildfire crisis.

Migrants we spoke to said they felt they have been ignored by the public response and media coverage of the fires. One Mexican worker told us: "We remain invisible here. Or perhaps people think we do not have anything to say?"

Migrant workers in Canada are sadly not alone in not being heard. Migrant workers in Hawaii are now in limbo after [wildfires devastated the historic city of Lahaina](#). Many faced similar challenges after the 2017 [Thomas Fire](#) in southern California.

When [natural disasters](#) occur, emergency and recovery plans must include the voices and needs of all those affected—especially those most vulnerable. Governments must urgently revise immigration policies to ensure that migrants, regardless of their legal status, are able to ask for and receive the support they need during times of crisis.

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