

Ottawa blocking badly-needed workers from entering B.C.

'Hundreds of millions' of dollars lost, says B.C. construction industry

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[CBC News](#)

B.C. construction companies are accusing Ottawa of squandering "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of business by shutting out hundreds of skilled foreign workers.

"I am depressed," tilesetter Ben Anca told CBC News. "Because I am expecting my government to work with me, not to completely disregard my needs and my company's needs."

Anca's Vancouver-area company, Zig-Zag Finishes Enterprises Inc., is one of

dozens of B.C. employers trying to bring in temporary workers from other countries, to fill about 20,000 job openings in B.C.'s hot construction market.

About 6,000 positions in B.C. and the Yukon were awaiting assessment in early November, according to Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

Philip Hochstein, of the Independent Contractors and Business Association of B.C. said companies having trouble hiring workers for their jobs are delaying or cancelling hundreds of projects.

"The bureaucrats in the Immigration Department just don't understand that they need to be recruiters instead of gatekeepers," Hochstein said. "This is costing the province of British Columbia hundreds of millions of dollars because projects are being held back."

Anca has enough work to hire 12 more tilesetters, but says the federal government is standing in his way.

"Why shouldn't I be the one making the decision who works for my company and who represents my company?" Anca asked.

Months of waiting for nothing

In February, Anca applied to bring over 10 tilesetters, most from his home country, Romania. He paid \$20,000 in legal and other fees, travelled to Romania, and waited months. In August, his application was pre-approved by Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

Then, visa officers working overseas for Immigration Canada denied his hand-picked applicants entry visas, indicating in the rejection forms that they didn't believe the workers would return to their home countries after their temporary postings.

"I am an honest citizen. I pay my taxes and I just want to expand my business," said Anca. "I just gave up at least five projects."

"These people are presumed guilty before they are even given a chance to prove their innocence," said Vivian Lee, of Lowe and Company, Anca's Vancouver law firm. "They (the workers) will just go look for a job elsewhere because there are other countries that will welcome them."

Lee said her firm has hundreds of foreign worker applicants stuck in a sea of red tape.

For example, it takes months just for the employers to get the Labour Market Opinion (LMO), the first step in getting approved. The LMO is Human Resources and Social Development Canada's opinion on the likely impact hiring foreign workers will have on the Canadian labour market.

Lee said government deadlines to bring workers over often pass before the paperwork gets processed.



Tilesetter Ben Anca says he just wants to expand his business by bringing in foreign workers from his home country, Romania. (CBC)



Philip Hochstein, president of the Independent Contractors and Business Association of B.C., says companies having trouble hiring workers for their jobs are delaying or cancelling hundreds of projects. (CBC)

"Waiting and waiting for months," Lee said. "And meanwhile, the employer here can't start the business operation."

Adding to the frustration, Lee said that applying for pre-approval in B.C. can take five months, while businesses in Ontario get it done in about three weeks.

"They (Ontario) are not needing workers as badly as we do, yet we have longer processing times."

Delayed projects cost B.C. economy millions

"We're just getting our butts kicked internationally," said Hochstein, of the Independent Contractors and Business Association of B.C.

Hochstein said one member of his association recently spent tens of thousands of dollars travelling to China to interview 200 prospective skilled workers. The employer selected 43 that he wanted to hire. Hochstein said all 43 have since been denied visas by Immigration Canada.

Hochstein said that project was cancelled and hundreds of others are also being cancelled or put on hold.

Minister of Human Resources and Social Development Monte Solberg told CBC News he is trying to get the overseas visa offices to speed up the process.

"We're doing what we can to expedite the process and we've cut a lot of paperwork, meaning that workers can get here more quickly than they could otherwise," said Solberg. "But there are still big challenges processing this massive increase through some of our embassies but immigration officials continue to work on it."

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— Monte Solberg,
minister of Human Resources and Social Development

In September, the federal government announced a pilot project aimed at fast-tracking foreign applicants for certain jobs, such as ski instructors and hotel clerks. Aside from carpenters and crane operators, most construction trades were left off the list.

"I don't want to put down the need for ski lessons, but you would think the need to get in your house or your condo in British Columbia today would trump that 10 times out of 10," said Hochstein.

Ben Anca said B.C. homeowners are also losing out because it's getting increasingly difficult to find good skilled tradesmen for smaller projects.

"If they are going to want some work done in their homes, either they are going to have to pay more than it's worth to have it done in time or they are going to have to wait for months," said Anca.



Vancouver immigration consultant Vivian Lee says her law firm has hundreds of foreign worker applicants stuck in a sea of red tape. (CBC)