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N.B. needs migrant workers, but big issues exist: senator



Independent Senator Ratna Omidvar is chair of the Senate committee on social affairs, science and technology.

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Adam Huras | Brunswick News

New Brunswick needs migrant workers for its agricultural and seafood industries to survive, says the head of a Senate committee conducting a comprehensive study on Canada's temporary and migrant labour force.

But the system matching temporary foreign workers to jobs has large gaps.

Meanwhile, reports of abuses of migrants are troubling and haven't been completely allayed in touring New Brunswick.

Sen. Ratna Omidvar, chair of the Senate committee on social affairs, science and technology, says that's apparent after a group of senators toured the region this week.

“I don't think our recommendations can come soon enough, because here in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island we have seen how reliant the

agriculture and aquaculture industries are on migrant workers,” Omidvar said. “We have heard employers say that if it wasn’t for migrant workers they would be out of business tomorrow.”

The group of senators visited an apple orchard and a seafood processor while in New Brunswick this week.

They met with migrant workers face to face, and advocates seeking better worker conditions.

They visited temporary foreign worker housing, while later making similar stops in Prince Edward Island at a dairy farm and other locations.

It comes after Canada approved more than 196,000 temporary foreign worker positions last year to employers who were authorized under the federal program, according to Ottawa’s own figures.

That represents a 78 per cent increase over the number of migrant worker positions approved in 2021.

A total of 6,302 were approved to work in New Brunswick.

It also comes after the committee heard testimony in Ottawa of temporary foreign worker abuses.

Adriana Vega Guillen from Costa Rica testified she was beaten and abused while working at a facility in Memramcook, and that she was told it was up to her employer to resolve the issues when she reached out to provincial and federal authorities for help.

Earlier this month, Tomoya Obokata, a UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, denounced Canada's temporary foreign worker program as a "breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery."

"I am disturbed by the fact that many migrant workers are exploited and abused in this country," he said.

Obokata said migrant workers face deportation if they lose their work permits, which also prevent them from changing employers if they face abuse.

"This creates a dependency relationship between employers and employees, making the latter vulnerable to exploitation," he said, adding that many workers are reluctant to report abuse because they fear losing their permits.

Omidvar said the trip hasn't put those concerns to bed.

"I'm not at all satisfied with what I have seen and whether it allays the concerns or not," she said. "I think the measures do fall short of providing

the safety and security that workers deserve.”

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