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Third migrant farm worker dies as Canada reaches deal with Mexico

KATHRYN BLAZE BAUM > AND TAVIA GRANT >

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A worker at Scotlynn Group's farm in Vittoria, Ont. – the facility seen here on June 3, 2020 – confirmed that the latest man to die of COVID-19-related causes had been employed at the operation.

NATHAN DENETTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

A third Mexican migrant farm worker has died in Canada after testing positive for COVID-19. The man had been employed at Southern Ontario's Scotlynn Group farm, the site of the province's largest farm outbreak, where nearly all of the 216 migrant workers have tested positive for COVID-19.

The latest fatality comes as Mexico's Foreign Ministry said Sunday it will resume allowing workers from that country to come to Canada, after Mexico had halted sending more labourers amid growing health and safety concerns. The two governments have "reached an agreement to improve the [health] conditions of the compatriots who work on farms," so the seasonal agricultural worker program "has started operating again after a temporary pause," the Mexican government said in a statement.

The outbreak has triggered heightened scrutiny of Canada's temporary foreign worker program and the conditions in which foreign labourers live and work. In Ontario alone, more than 630 migrant farm workers have been infected with COVID-19; two men from Mexico – Bonifacio Eugenio Romero, 31, and Rogelio Munoz Santos, 24 – have died. The third worker who died is Juan Lopez Chaparro, 55; he had been coming to Canada since 2010 and is survived by his wife and four children, the Migrant Rights Network said in a release Monday.

Federal Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough told The Globe and Mail last week that Ottawa will overhaul the temporary foreign worker program, including through more surprise inspections of working and living conditions at farms that employ migrant workers. Mexico had temporarily stopped sending more workers, until Canadian officials got a handle on the outbreaks and ensured people are properly paid while they're in isolation.

In its statement on Sunday, Mexico said its agreement with Canada "recognizes the need" to review the temporary foreign worker program, with both short-term and long-term measures. A new group, with representatives from both countries, will work to ensure better access to health care and increase scrutiny of farms that are non-compliant with guidelines.

A Globe investigation into outbreaks among migrant farm workers published Tuesday exposed myriad factors that made them vulnerable to the virus: overrun accommodations; supervisors putting pressure on ill labourers to keep working; no paid sick days; an information vacuum; threats of deportation if strict productivity targets weren't met; and lack of personal protective equipment.

While Ottawa issued rules for the mandatory 14-day quarantine for international arrivals, the conditions that workers faced post-isolation weren't adequately monitored, health experts

says.

“One life lost is one too many,” Santiago Escobar, a co-ordinator with the Agriculture Workers Alliance, which operates under the United Food and Commercial Workers union and represents migrant workers, said in an e-mail. “Three is unacceptable.”

In a statement on Sunday, the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit said that it learned that a migrant worker who had been in intensive care with the novel coronavirus had passed away.

“It’s an absolute tragedy that someone who comes to Canada to work in the agricultural industry and support his family back home loses his life so far from his loved ones,” said Norfolk Mayor Kristal Chopp, who is also chair of the board of health for Haldimand and Norfolk counties. The health unit’s Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Shanker Nesathurai, visited workers at the farm on Saturday night to deliver the news.

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A worker at Scotlynn Group’s farm in Vittoria, Ont., confirmed that the latest man to die of COVID-19-related causes had been employed at the operation. Just before the weekend, the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit provided an update on the Scotlynn outbreak, noting that two workers were in intensive care. It said that since the outbreak began at the end of May, a total of 13 people associated with Scotlynn had been treated in the hospital.

As of Sunday, there were 199 positive cases among migrant workers at the farm, which grows peppers, watermelon, pumpkins and asparagus; an additional 18 people associated with the operation have been infected.

Three Scotlynn workers were among those interviewed for The Globe’s recent investigation. The men described overcrowded living conditions, including small bedrooms with multiple sets of bunk beds; ill workers living with healthy ones; leaky toilets and showers that only ran hot water; an absence of information on how to access health care; and no PPE to guard against the virus.

Scott Biddle, president and chief executive of Scotlynn Group, could not be reached for comment Sunday. In a recent interview, Mr. Biddle responded to the workers’ allegations and said the farm’s accommodations are well above standards. He said the farm equipped workers with masks and gloves. As for accusations that supervisors pressed employees to work with

symptoms, Mr. Biddle said that's not the case. "There would be no advantage to us not to tend to a sick worker," he said.

In its release Monday, the Migrant Rights Network reiterated its call for permanent resident status for all workers "to stop further deaths." For decades, it said, "migrant workers have sounded the alarm about federal and provincial laws that make it impossible for workers to protect themselves from workplace illness and to refuse unsafe work."

Mexico's National Human Rights Commission announced earlier this month that it is conducting an ex officio investigation into the deaths of Mr. Eugenio Romero and Mr. Munoz Santos, who died on May 30 and June 5, respectively. The commission is probing the conditions Mexican migrant workers face in Ontario, as well as the alleged lack of attention from Mexican consular officials in Canada.

Mr. Eugenio Romero's wife spoke out for the first time to Canadian media on the weekend, releasing a statement Saturday that said her husband came from an "economically humble town" in the state of Puebla; when he heard about Canada's work program, he leapt at the opportunity to better support his family.

Mr. Eugenio Romero arrived in February and worked at Woodside Greenhouses, a pepper farm in Kingsville, Ont. He had been isolating in a hotel room for nine days when he had trouble breathing and called an ambulance; by the time paramedics arrived, he had no vital signs.

"He was a man of values," Juana Vazquez said. "He was humble, responsible, empathetic, generous, a person full of patience and trust in others." Earlier this month, residents in his home town held a "beautiful farewell organized by the people," despite the pandemic. Ms. Vazquez said she is focused on repatriating her husband's body. The family, she said, expects to receive his remains this week.

With a report from Greg McArthur in Toronto

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