

Migrant workers now focus on Canada:

Seasonal program gives safe, more lucrative alternative to U.S.

This story ran in the Toronto Star's Weekend World section July 28, 2012. Be sure to also read the January 5, 2013 [Washington Post story](#) on Mexican guest workers heading to Canada.

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Special to *The Star*

SAN SIMON EL ALTO, MEXICO – Pablo Zamora farmed corn and peas and lived in a shack with a dirt floor in this rancho high in the alpine air and pine forests southwest of Mexico City.

Then he discovered the lettuce fields of Quebec a decade ago and made enough money each summer to support a family back in Mexico and build a three-room residence of brick and cement.

"This isn't the most elegant place," Zamora said, while sipping pulque – a fermented maguey drink resembling a milkshake – in a kitchen adorned with family photos and pots and pans hanging on the walls. "But we're living so much better."

Zamora kissed his family goodbye last week, heading north for another summer of agricultural work near Sherrington, Quebec, where he expected to pick seven varieties of lettuce for \$9.70 an hour plus benefits.

He'll join more than 15,000 fellow Mexicans toiling on Canadian farms through a seasonal agricultural program, which has operated for 38 years, been lauded as an example of orderly migration and credited with improving both wellbeing and living standards in some of Mexico's most impoverished pockets.

Zamora expects to be back in San Simon for the October feting of St. Jude Thadeus, the patron saint of lost causes, thanks to his departing with a work visa and a return plane ticket – two documents other migrants lack when jumping the border in search of work in the United States.

"If you have documents, you're not going to have many problems," Zamora says.

Migration without documents has been a lost cause in recent years for those in San Simon and beyond as the U.S.-Mexico border has become increasingly fortified, anti-immigrant laws have been passed in places like Arizona and Alabama and jobs – especially in the construction sector that previously employed so many Mexicans – remain scant.

An April report from the Pew Hispanic Center found migration between from Mexico to the U.S. has collapsed with slightly more Mexicans returning or being deported than venturing north.

Zamora knows the difficulties and dangers of going undocumented first hand: his brother-in-law died three years ago in police custody after getting a traffic ticket in Georgia.

Such stories are distressing common in Malinalco, the municipality containing San Simon, located 100 kilometres from the national capital in outlying Mexico state.



Pablo Zamora picks lettuce in Quebec each summer through a guest worker program for Mexican farm labourers. He considers the program safer than illegally jumping the U.S.-Mexico border.

Ellen Calmus, director of a Malinalco migrant support centre known as The Corner Project, spends much of her time helping families with kin in the United States, who have gone incommunicado – often the consequences of not having legal papers.

She prefers the seasonal Canadian program for a simple reason: "We're not bringing back bodies."

Allegations of exploitation of seasonal workers have been made in Canada – often by unions. Calmus knows the criticisms, but comments, "(The migration) alternatives are all terrible right now."

Sociologist Gustavo Verduzco of the Colegio de México also speaks well of the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program.

His research shows program participants after six years are more likely to live in better houses, have higher incomes and are more likely keep their children in school than those staying behind in Mexico.

Safety is emerging as another success of the program.

"(Migrants) might earn more if they went to the United States," Verduzco says. "But they prefer Canada because it's legal and it's safer."

Residents from San Simon seem to know the risks – and say young men are thinking twice about departing without documents

"It's 10 times harder to go than before," said Armando Flores, a cab driver who spent 13 years working construction in Delaware.

Zamora's nineteen year old son, Alexis, expresses little enthusiasm about going north without the proper papers, saying the trip is expensive – human smugglers now charge more – and the path through the Sonora desert can be fatal.

He would prefer to follow his dad to Quebec, but spots in the Canadian seasonal worker program are limited and demand exceeds supply.

Sergio Roman recalled having a 2,000-worker backlog in 2005, when he began working in international affairs for the Mexico state government, and only being able to nominate 45 new participants for the program.

The state government, he says, subsequently began pursuing deals directly with Canadian companies to bring in job-seekers from Mexico state for activities ranging from working in slaughterhouses to processing cranberries.

Workers earn more, bring back skills to Mexico and most importantly, "Avoid loss of life and the abuses of human trafficking," Roman says.

"It's been very popular," he adds, although the 2008 economic crisis put a dent in the demand from Canada.

Zamora notices the growing popularity of Canada, too. "All the young people now say, 'Get to Canada.'"