

Ottawa extends foreign work visas

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VANCOUVER -Foreign workers will be able to stay longer in Canada under a policy change announced by the federal government.

Until now, workers have been able to stay a year. That has been extended to two years.

The move, announced in Vancouver Friday by federal Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg, has been praised by some business groups concerned about a shortage of skilled workers.

But it has been slammed by some labour leaders, who suggest it will just provide a pool of cheap employees, denying Canadians jobs.

Solberg said the change to the Temporary Foreign Workers program was aimed at helping Canada cope with labour shortages.

"Employers who have exhausted their search for Canadian workers often need to hire temporary foreign worker to work for a period longer than a year, and today's announcement will allow that to happen," said Solberg.

Until now, many temporary foreign workers had to leave Canada after 12 months for four months, and then re-apply to come back.

With the new changes, they can stay for up to 24 months with having to request an extension.

The change was applauded by the president of the Whistler, B.C., Chamber of Commerce as the resort community struggles to deal with massive turnover and the challenges of hosting the 2010 Olympics.

"(It's) great news for the tourism industry, particularly in B.C. where we have been experiencing pretty severe shortages of workers over the last year or two," said Louise Lundy.

She said the chamber has been lobbying Ottawa on the issue for more than a year.

"(The policy change) really helps reduce our turnover rates and ensure some sort of stability for employers and employees," she said.

Whistler has annual turnover rates of 65 per cent in some hotels and 120 per cent for some small businesses linked, in part, to the foreign worker issue.

The president of the B.C. Federation of Labour was, however, less enthusiastic describing the announcement in a statement as a "cheap labour strategy for employers."

"The program does nothing to build our immigration system or invest in the skills training our country needs," he said.

Sinclair said the plan also does nothing to ensure the monitoring of labour standards for workers.