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Export date: Sat Oct 31 19:43:07 2026 / +0000 GMT

Ontario government to ramp up pandemic safety inspections on farms

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The Ontario government has announced the ramping up of province wide inspections for pandemic safety on farms in an effort to protect migrant workers, set to arrive for the growing season, from COVID-19.

The government made the announcement regarding the expansion of inspections last Wednesday (Jan. 27) detailing safety measures that would be focused on inspections and enforcement. The inspections will be looking at a number of safety protocols being implemented on the farms, in the hopes of preventing similar outbreaks of COVID-19 that happened last summer.

?We rely on these worker to ensure our grocery store shelves remain stocked and families have food on the table. These inspections will help stop the spread of COVID-19 on farm, and in our communities,? said Monte McNaughton, Minster of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

Inspectors will be focusing on COVID-19 safety measures such as hand hygiene, masking, enhanced cleaning and disinfecting and proper physical distancing between workers. Other measure include raising awareness of COVID-19 health and safety requirements, enhancing protection by ensuring employers are actively screening workers, and having a daily COVID-19 questionnaire.

Brian French is the owner of Lennox Farms in Melanchthon and says the local farm has already had a health inspector out to inspect the farms COVID-19 protocols.

Lennox Farms each year hires 11 migrant workers at the farm, but with COVID-19 they've had to cut back down to nine. Due to the pandemic, four of his workers were unable to get home last year and have remained on the farm.

Following their inspection, French said there were problems with the spacing of beds in two rooms of the bungalow house, which is designated for the migrant workers on the farm.

?Last year it was if they slept kind of head to toe away from each other, so their faces were two metre apart, now the beds have to be two meters apart.?

French also says spacing is one of the biggest issues farmers face with the protocols.

?The housing and spacing is the biggest issue for farms, because generally most people only have a trailer or something, and they put three or four guys in the trailers. Trailers aren't very big so you're not going to get as many workers in it.?

Speaking to his thoughts on the increased inspections French said, ?They're just doing their job trying to keep everyone safe, make sure everyone has enough space in the house and that they're following protocols like any business would.?

Enforcement of COVID-19 protocols, in response to any violation of OHSA, could range from inspectors issuing order or the laying of charges. The maximum penalty under OHSA, if convicted, is $1.5 million for a corporation and $100,000 for an individual. Individuals may also be imprisoned for up to 12 months.