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## Construction group lobbies Harper to loosen immigration

**Dirk Meissner**  
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VICTORIA -- Canada needs crane operators, pipefitters and welders so badly construction organizations are pleading with Prime Minister Stephen Harper to reform the country's immigration laws to make it easier to import skilled trades workers.

The Canadian Construction Association sent an open letter to Harper on Wednesday saying relaxed immigration laws are needed to allow builders to hire needed workers to keep up with a building boom, especially in Western Canada.

British Columbia was estimated to need 35,000 workers in the next several years to replace retiring workers and keep up with demand, the association said.

Canada will need up to 190,000 workers to fill jobs across the country, the association said.

"Although aggressive efforts by all industry players must continue in order to recruit Canadians to the construction industry, the fact remains that immigration policy must play a bigger role in meeting future labour demand," said Michael Atkinson, president of the construction association.

A statement released by Immigration Minister Monte Solberg said the federal government wants to ensure as many Canadians as possible take advantage of trades jobs, but immigration is also being examined.

"Countries around the world are increasingly looking to immigration as a primary source of talent and innovation to help them generate wealth and prosperity," said Solberg's statement.

"This is also Canada's time to explore proactive immigration policies. I believe that this is a key to our country's success."

Dee Miller, a construction association board member and a large project building contractor in British Columbia, said the industry boom is forecast to continue until at least 2013.

"There are not enough people today domestically attracted to our industry. To find the skills that we need, we need to have our immigration policies changed."

The construction association made at least six recommendations, including placing the issue of targeted immigration to ease labour shortages on the agenda at the July 26-28 provincial and territorial leaders' meeting in Newfoundland.

Miller said there are massive worker shortages in heavy industry and in the commercial construction sector.

"Crane operators, there's a huge shortage for all of the industry," she said. "One of the

crane companies that rents cranes said he's 500 crane operators short -- and you don't learn to be a crane operator overnight."

A spokesman for British Columbia's unionized trades workers said more workers are definitely needed and the government should consider looking outside Canada, but not before giving people within Canada a chance at working.

The federal government should first take steps to make it easier for skilled workers to move across the country to fill jobs without completing provincial training programs, said Wayne Peppard, executive director of the B.C. and Yukon Building and Construction Trades Council.

Ottawa must also ensure immigrant workers are offered the same protections and wage opportunities as Canadian workers, Peppard said.--

"There has to be a demonstrated need and those people who are brought here have to be paid the same," he said.

Casey Edge, a spokesman for the Canadian Homebuilders Association in Victoria, said the strong residential construction market has created the need for more workers.

The homebuilders have also called on Ottawa to reform immigration laws, but the government must also look to young Canadians to fill

"Students understand what they need to do to become a lawyer, what they need to do to become a doctor or an accountant, but what do they need to do to become a builder? We haven't established a clear career path for young people," Edge said.

Darrel Orr, owner of a 15-year-old, four-employee residential construction company in Victoria, said the labour shortage has been getting tighter over the past two years.

"Obviously, I'd like to see Canadians educated and moved into the work force before we start bringing in immigrants, but if that's what's required that's what's required."

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