



## After a pause, growth resumes in British Columbia in 2021

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Ottawa – The construction and maintenance sector in British Columbia is poised to return to growth in 2021 after a year in which the industry recorded its first material decline in activity in more than a decade, labour-market data released today by BuildForce Canada suggests.

British Columbia was among those provinces hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The province saw declines in new housing, commercial, and industrial building construction, which experienced double-digit declines in investment compared with 2019. Those losses were partially offset by a rise in demands from major engineering and pipeline projects, as well as numerous public-transportation projects.

BuildForce Canada’s 2021–2030 [Construction and Maintenance Looking Forward report](#) for the province forecasts that growth in the sector is expected to resume in 2021 as major project demands continue to rise, and industrial and commercial investment recovers.

“The slowdown in construction and maintenance activity in British Columbia last year may have been seen by some as a blessing, as the province’s labour market has experienced chronic recruiting challenges,” says BuildForce Canada Executive Director Bill Ferreira. “Having said that, the brakes won’t be on for long. We expect growth to return in 2021 with the stacking of projects across nearly every sector of the industry – heavy industrial, public transit, education, health care, public infrastructure projects, as well as new housing, renovation work and commercial building construction. This could create significant recruiting challenges across the industry.”

Over the coming decade, BuildForce Canada expects employment to rise by 17,800 workers, or about 10% more than the current labour force. The challenge for the industry will be how to address short-term labour market demands. Between 2020 and 2022, the non-residential sector alone is expected to require an additional 11,500 workers (+16%) to keep pace with demands, with much of that growth concentrated in the Lower Mainland region.

“The ramp-up in major project requirements could be lessened somewhat by the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic,” says Ferreira. “Slowdowns in other sectors of the industry in other regions of the province may encourage labour mobility, but that may be limited for those trades with specialized skills and experience. B.C.’s industry will certainly have to consider

adopting short-term strategies designed to recruit workers from other industries and other parts of the country, and over the longer term, enhance its recruitment of youth and groups traditionally underrepresented in the industry.”

BuildForce Canada estimates that as many as 41,000 workers, or approximately 22% of the current labour force, will retire by 2030. Accounting also for demands relating to expansion, the province’s industry will need to recruit close to 59,650 workers in the next decade.

That gap will be closed somewhat by the expected 35,150 new entrants under the age of 30 available locally, but a significant portion of remaining demand will need to be drawn from other industries or other provinces.

The development of skilled tradespersons in the construction industry takes years, and often requires participation in a provincial apprenticeship program. New registrations in British Columbia’s 20 largest construction trade programs have fluctuated significantly over the last few years. After peaking at more than 8,500 in 2013, registrations declined, but have since recovered, reaching 8,000 in 2019.

The pandemic is expected to further cause ripples in registration levels in 2020. Limited data collected to date suggests that the pandemic has imposed significant obstacles to the in-school delivery of training, testing, and certification. These impacts are likely to reduce the near-term numbers of new certified workers.

Based on projected new registrations and completion trends, several of British Columbia’s trades are expected to meet or exceed the number of new certified journeypersons required by 2030. However, the Boilermaker, Carpenter, Gasfitter, Glazier, Heavy Equipment Operator, Industrial Electrician, Insulator, Lather, Painter, Roofer, and Welder trades were identified as at risk of being undersupplied. An ongoing commitment to training and apprenticeship development will remain necessary to avoid potential future skills shortages.

Building a sustainable and diverse labour force will require the construction and maintenance industry to increase recruitment from groups traditionally underrepresented in the current construction labour force, including women, Indigenous people, and new Canadians.

In 2020, there were approximately 32,700 women employed in B.C.’s construction industry, of which 34% worked directly on construction projects. Of the 175,900 tradespeople employed in the industry, women made up only 6% of the total.

The Indigenous population is another group that presents recruitment opportunities for British Columbia’s construction industry. In 2020, 5.7% of B.C.’s construction labour force was made up of Indigenous people, compared with about 5% of the province’s overall working-age population. Of those in the construction and maintenance industry, 82% work directly on construction projects. Given the predisposition of Indigenous workers to consider careers in

construction, there may be scope to further increase the recruitment of Indigenous people into the industry.

The B.C. construction industry may also leverage new Canadians over the coming decade to meet anticipated labour market requirements. The province is expected to welcome an average of more than 69,000 new international migrants each year between 2021 and 2030. This will make new Canadians a growing segment of the overall labour force.

British Columbia's construction labour force is comprised of approximately 24% new Canadians, which is lower than the overall share of new Canadians in the provincial labour force (29%).

BuildForce Canada is a national industry-led organization that represents all sectors of Canada's construction industry. Its mandate is to provide accurate and timely labour market data and analysis, as well as programs and initiatives to help manage labour force requirements and build the capacity and capability of Canada's construction and maintenance industry. Visit [www.constructionforecasts.ca](http://www.constructionforecasts.ca).

For further information, contact Bill Ferreira, Executive Director, BuildForce Canada, at [ferreira@buildforce.ca](mailto:ferreira@buildforce.ca) or 613-569-5552 ext. 2220.

This report was produced with the support and input of a variety of provincial construction and maintenance industry stakeholders. For local industry reaction to this latest BuildForce Canada report, please contact:

Kim Barbero  
CEO  
Mechanical Contractors Association of British Columbia  
(604) 205-5058

Scott Bone  
President  
Northern Regional Construction Association  
(250) 596-9901

Ryan Bruce  
Membership Development & Government Relations  
CLAC  
(250) 331-1465

Paul de Jong  
President  
Progressive Contractors Association of Canada  
(403) 620-3781

Chris Atchison  
President  
British Columbia Construction Association  
(250) 475-1077

Brynn Bourke  
Interim Executive Director  
British Columbia Building Trades  
(778) 397-2220

Neil Moody  
President and CEO  
Canadian Home Builders' Association – BC  
(604) 432-7112 ext. 304

Kelly Scott  
President  
BC Road Builders and Heavy Construction Association  
(604) 436-0220

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