



Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

March 2021



This Labour Market Bulletin provides an analysis of Labour Force Survey results for the province of British Columbia (B.C.), including the regions of Northern B.C., Vancouver Island and Coast, Lower Mainland, Thompson–Okanagan and the Kootenays.

OVERVIEW

The provincial labour market remains resilient against the ongoing pandemic, and some industries have already recovered, at least by measure of employment, from the impacts of COVID-19. Employment in British Columbia (B.C.) increased slightly (+1.7%) over the first quarter of 2021. The job growth was largely due to gains in full-time employment (+1.8%), with slight gains in part-time employment (+0.9%).¹ The province's unemployment rate at 7.3% remained relatively unchanged (-0.2%) from the previous quarter.

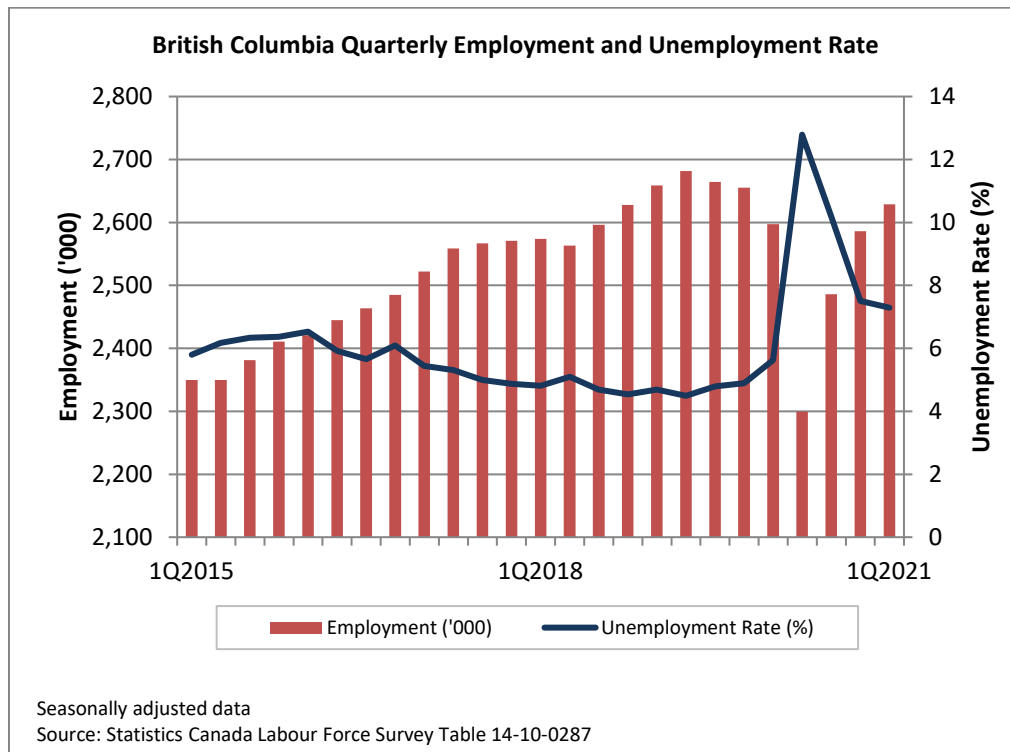
Though employment is above what it was a year ago (+1.2% or +31,800),² the province's labour market will be under stress in the short-term. Already, the province has imposed new restrictions at the end of March in an attempt to curb a third wave of COVID-19 cases.³ However, the provincial government has begun its new vaccination registration system, which will allow eligible adults to register and book their vaccine appointments.⁴

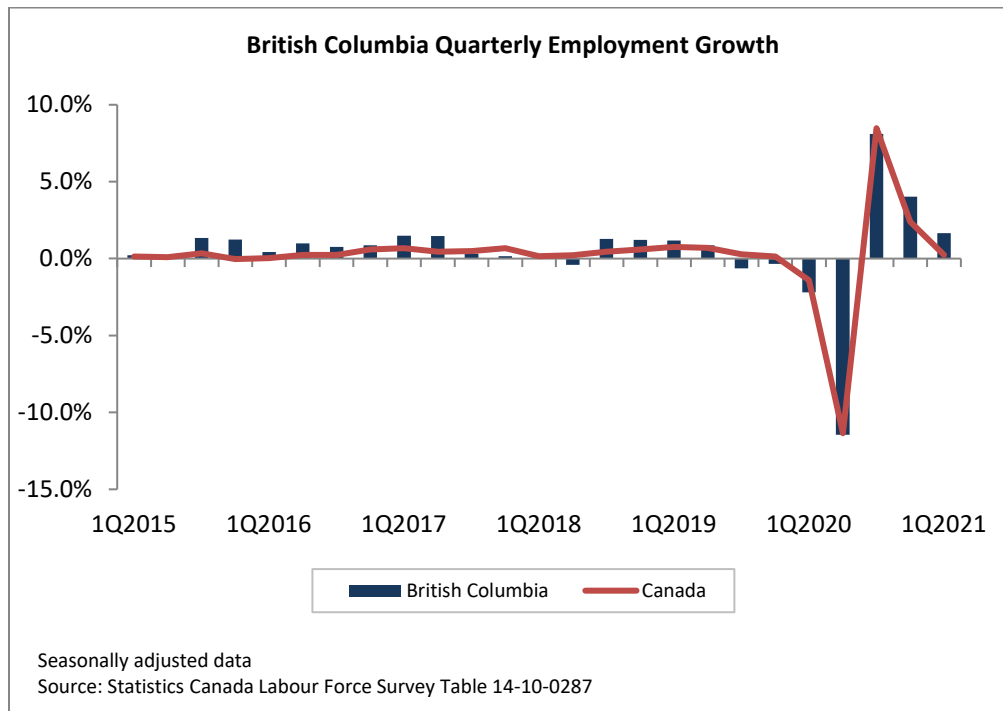
British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics

Seasonally adjusted data	1st Quarter 2021	4th Quarter 2020	1st Quarter 2020	Quarterly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Population 15 + ('000)	4,323.2	4,317.1	4,281.7	6.1	0.1	41.5	1.0
Labour Force ('000)	2,835.7	2,796.1	2,752.0	39.6	1.4	83.7	3.0
Employment ('000)	2,629.0	2,586.3	2,597.2	42.7	1.7	31.8	1.2
Full-Time ('000)	2,050.8	2,013.6	2,063.2	37.2	1.8	-12.4	-0.6
Part-Time ('000)	578.2	572.8	534.0	5.4	0.9	44.2	8.3
Unemployment ('000)	206.7	209.8	154.8	-3.1	-1.5	51.9	33.5
Unemployment Rate (%)	7.3	7.5	5.6	-0.2	-	1.7	-
Participation Rate (%)	65.6	64.8	64.3	0.8	-	1.3	-
Employment Rate (%)	60.8	59.9	60.7	0.9	-	0.1	-

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0287, formerly CANSIM 282-0087





The unemployment rate for B.C. youth (15 to 24 years) was 14.6% in the first quarter of 2021, relatively unchanged (-0.2%) from the previous quarter.⁵ Young people continue to struggle finding work as employment in service sector industries, including accommodations and food services, remain vulnerable to pandemic measures. The youth unemployment rate remains 3.2 percentage points above what it was a year ago as more young people joined the labour force (+29,800) but were largely unable to find work (+16,400 unemployed).⁶ Looking forward, the unemployment rate for youth will likely remain above the pre-pandemic rates until the outbreak is under control.

Pandemic restrictions continue to create barriers for some women, particularly those between the ages of 15 to 24 years. Over the first quarter, the unemployment rate for young women worsened from 12.7% to 16.9%. As restrictions remain in place, employment opportunities for young women, particularly in face-to-face occupations, remain challenging. However, opportunities may improve later this summer as vaccinations ramp up.⁷

British Columbia Quarterly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally adjusted data	1st Quarter 2021 (%)	4th Quarter 2020 (%)	1st Quarter 2020 (%)	Quarterly Variation (% points)	Yearly Variation (% points)
Total	7.3	7.5	5.6	-0.2	1.7
25 years and over	6.1	6.4	4.7	-0.3	1.4
Men - 25 years and over	5.9	6.8	4.4	-0.9	1.5
Women - 25 years and over	6.3	5.9	5.0	0.4	1.3
15 to 24 years	14.6	14.8	11.4	-0.2	3.2
Men - 15 to 24 years	12.4	16.7	11.9	-4.3	0.5
Women - 15 to 24 years	16.9	12.7	10.8	4.2	6.1

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0287, formerly CANSIM 282-0087

EMPLOYMENT IN INDUSTRY

The province's goods producing sector decreased slightly (-0.8%) over the first quarter of 2021. Significant job losses in **agriculture** (-23.3%) offset gains in the natural resources, utilities, and construction industries.⁸ Overall employment in the goods sector continues to recover, only 16,900 fewer workers from a year ago. Though employment in most industries have grown over the year, a few industries are still worse off due to the pandemic measures.⁹

The **construction** sector's employment remains well below last year's level (-28,400), with nearly all subsectors in the industry having lost jobs, most notably among heavy and civil engineering construction, and trade contracting. However, the sector is now showing signs of recovery. For instance, according to February 2021 data, housing starts in B.C. were up 7.5% when compared to February 2020.¹⁰ Housing demand outside of Metro Vancouver is on the rise, driving up sales and prices, especially as new homes have yet to offset the dwindling supply of resale homes on the market. Unfortunately, rising housing prices in Canada are discouraging many first-time homebuyers, particularly Millennials, from entering the housing market.¹¹

Year-over-year, the value of building permits shows signs of an accelerated recovery, as the valuation increased to roughly \$1.5B (+58.5%), primarily as the value of multiple dwelling building (e.g. condominiums) permits increased by around \$505M (+226.6%).¹² The sudden surge was the result of a number of related factors, including low interest rates, more buyers looking outside of metro Vancouver for more living space, new housing projects, and work progressing on planned communities along Greater Vancouver's SkyTrain lines.

At this time, work is slowly ramping-up on five major industrial projects across northern B.C., including the \$6.6B Coastal GasLink pipeline. The province's public health officer ordered these employers to reduce their workforce earlier this year in order to ensure that the Northern Health Authority could manage COVID-19 cases.¹³

In Vancouver, construction has begun on the new \$2.1B St. Paul's hospital. The project is expected to directly support more than 8,500 jobs between now and when it opens in 2027.¹⁴ In addition, TransLink is planning to

build a new \$300M operations and maintenance centre in Coquitlam to support its network and fleet expansion.¹⁵

The **forestry** sector continues to adapt to ongoing challenges, including trade tariffs from the United States (U.S.) and a shrinking timber supply. However, lumber prices are at a historic high, and have far surpassed 2020's record price. The U.S. is Western Canada's largest customer for dimensional lumber used in home framing construction, and demand in America is very strong as a result of fewer pre-owned homes on the market. This trend is expected to continue through the year.

Looking forward, the sector will benefit from Paper Excellence's plans to recall around 200 employees and restart their Number 11 Paper Machine at its Catalyst Powell River mill around May 1.¹⁶ Roughly, 320 employees lost their jobs at the mill last year.¹⁷ Forestry will also benefit from the San Group's new re-manufacturing mill in Port Alberni on March 29. The company stated it hopes to employ 150 workers by the end of 2021.¹⁸

However, Greenwood Forest Products in Penticton has shutdown permanently due to rising prices and limited availability of lumber. The final day for roughly 35 employees was April 2, 2021.¹⁹

With job losses in both crop and animal production, employment in **Agriculture** decreased by 23.3% to roughly 25,000 workers over the quarter. Employment is likely to rebound in the coming months with an anticipated high volume of temporary foreign workers returning. In addition, the government of Canada has implemented new COVID-19 safety measures to support some temporary foreign workers upon their arrival.²⁰

Year-over-year, B.C.'s **services** sector employment increased by 2.3% to over 2.1M jobs. The increase was largely due to significant gains in industries focused on curtailing the COVID-19 pandemic, including **professional, scientific and technical services** (+13.9%), **public administration** (+15.7%), and **healthcare and social assistance** (+4.8%). However, **accommodation and food services** (-6.4%) and **other services** (-8.6%), both of which employ people in predominantly face-to-face occupations, remain the most negatively affected by public health measures to contain the pandemic.²¹

On a quarterly basis, **wholesale and retail trade** is recovering as 9,600 more people found employment. Retailers continue to operate under strict restrictions, including the requirement that masks be worn in all indoor retail spaces. According to most recent data, monthly retail trade sales increased to over \$8.3B, well above the \$5.7B in April 2020 when many stores closed due to the pandemic.²² With the "stay home" pandemic orders, consumers are spending more time and money online. As a result, some bricks and mortar stores have reduced staff. For example, Best Buy reduced staff by 750 employees across Canada due to the change in shopping habits.²³

The outlook for B.C.'s **tourism** sector this year is already off to a rough start, as a recently amended health order led to the closure of Whistler-Blackcomb ski resort until April 19, 2021.²⁴ Following the announcement, other ski resorts across the province including, Revelstoke, Big White²⁵, and Panorama²⁶, chose to follow suit and close early. Resorts remain hopeful that they will be able to reopen over the summer. Coastal communities, on-the-other-hand, will likely have another dismal year, as the cruise season was canceled until February 2022.²⁷

Foreign and domestic air travel remains challenging for the **transportation** industry with government ordered travel restrictions intended to stem the pandemic tide. Earlier this year WestJet announced further layoffs and flight reductions due to new federal rules requiring COVID-19 testing before flying into Canada. Roughly 1,000 Canadian employees with WestJet and its subsidiary Swoop were either furloughed, temporarily laid off, put on unpaid leave, or had their hours cut.²⁸ Air Canada also reduced its workforce by roughly 1,500 workers as it scaled down operations.²⁹ It is unclear at this time how many affected employees are located in B.C. Even regional carriers have cut flights as demand has fallen.

As vaccinations continue, Canadian airlines are slowly resuming some routes with health and safety precautions in place. Airlines appear optimistic that air travel will increase over the coming months.³⁰

British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally adjusted data ('000)	1st Quarter 2021	4th Quarter 2020	1st Quarter 2020	Quarterly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
Total employed, all industries	2,629.0	2,586.3	2,597.2	42.7	1.7	31.8	1.2
Goods-producing sector	488.4	492.3	505.3	-3.9	-0.8	-16.9	-3.3
Agriculture	25.0	32.6	30.6	-7.6	-23.3	-5.6	-18.3
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	50.7	49.7	42.9	1.0	2.0	7.8	18.2
Utilities	19.8	19.3	14.8	0.5	2.6	5.0	33.8
Construction	219.5	213.9	247.9	5.6	2.6	-28.4	-11.5
Manufacturing	173.4	176.8	169.0	-3.4	-1.9	4.4	2.6
Services-producing sector	2,140.6	2,094.0	2,091.9	46.6	2.2	48.7	2.3
Trade	394.3	384.7	395.9	9.6	2.5	-1.6	-0.4
Transportation and warehousing	139.2	135.9	142.1	3.3	2.4	-2.9	-2.0
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	163.2	164.5	168.6	-1.3	-0.8	-5.4	-3.2
Professional, scientific and technical services	254.2	237.2	223.1	17.0	7.2	31.1	13.9
Business, building and other support services	107.3	107.6	108.4	-0.3	-0.3	-1.1	-1.0
Educational services	188.8	189.0	179.3	-0.2	-0.1	9.5	5.3
Health care and social assistance	345.0	337.1	329.1	7.9	2.3	15.9	4.8
Information, culture and recreation	127.7	120.4	120.4	7.3	6.1	7.3	6.1
Accommodation and food services	175.7	185.3	187.8	-9.6	-5.2	-12.1	-6.4
Other services	110.2	104.7	120.6	5.5	5.3	-10.4	-8.6
Public administration	134.9	127.7	116.6	7.2	5.6	18.3	15.7

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0355, formerly CANSIM 282-0088

REGIONAL ANALYSIS

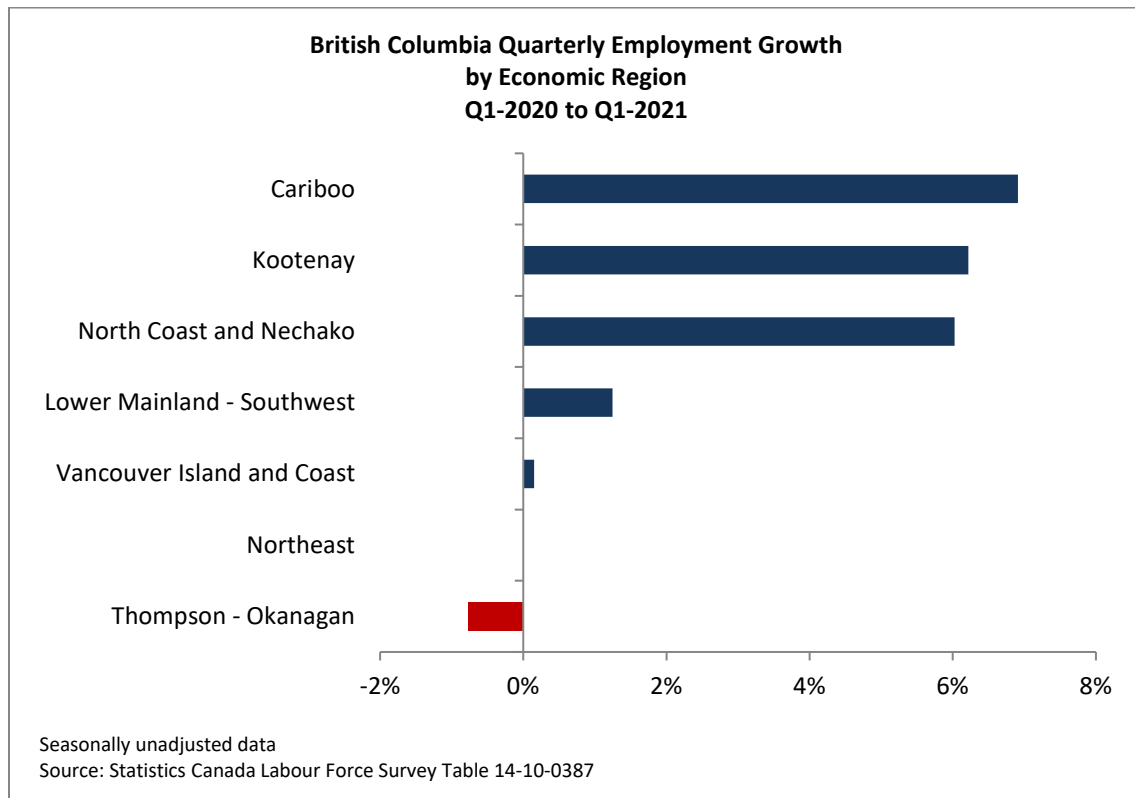
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic remains, yet employment in almost all the regions has increased over the last year. Only Thompson-Okanagan region saw employment shrink slightly (-0.86%) compared to the first quarter of 2020.³¹

British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region

Seasonally unadjusted data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	1st Quarter 2021 ('000)	1st Quarter 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	1st Quarter 2021 (%)	1st Quarter 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
British Columbia	2,595.1	2,563.5	1.2	7.7	5.9	1.8
Economic Regions						
Vancouver Island and Coast	399.2	398.6	0.2	7.4	6.4	1.0
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,665.9	1,645.4	1.2	8.0	5.4	2.6
Thompson - Okanagan	281.4	283.6	-0.8	7.3	7.4	-0.1
Kootenay	80.3	75.6	6.2	6.7	6.2	0.5
Cariboo	85.1	79.6	6.9	6.8	8.8	-2.0
North Coast and Nechako	44.0	41.5	6.0	8.5	6.1	2.4
Northeast	39.3	39.3	0.0	4.1	3.9	0.2

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey – Table 14-10-0387, formerly CANSIM 282-0122



Vancouver Island and Coast's economic recovery from the pandemic is ongoing. While employment is comparable to what it was a year ago, the unemployment rate is 7.4%, up from 6.4%.³² The growth of the region's forestry sector is ongoing and is expected to have a more positive impact on some communities in the coming months.

Looking forward, healthcare services across the region will improve once a \$6.25M redevelopment to the emergency department at Port Alberni's West Coast General Hospital is completed in summer 2022.³³ In addition, construction of a new intensive care unit (ICU) at Nanaimo Regional Hospital is expected to create 200 jobs.³⁴

Construction activity is expected to ramp up across the region following the announcement of several projects, including the new \$10.4M Hornby Island Community School,³⁵ and four new supportive housing projects funded by the province and the City of Victoria. The projects will include up to 192 permanent homes, with work on three of the projects expected to begin this summer, while the fourth is set for winter 2021. In addition, Nanaimo's Duke Point Terminal is planning a \$105M expansion to increase its container shipping capacity. The construction project is expected to last one to two years.³⁶

The outlook for the region's aquaculture sector appears grim, as seafood company Mowi announced in March it would lay off workers at its salmon farms in the Discovery Islands. The company estimates it may lay off up to 170 people, or about 30% of its B.C. workforce.³⁷ Last December, the federal government announced that all open-net fish farms in the Discovery Islands are to cease operations by June 30, 2022.³⁸

The province's recovery rests predominantly in the **Lower Mainland – Southwest**. Year-over-year, 20,500 jobs (+1.2%) were added this quarter.³⁹ The outlook for the region's construction industry is looking up. The region is benefiting from several provincially funded multi-million dollar projects, including the \$24.7M Eagle Mountain Elementary school project in Abbotsford. The new 460-seat school will feature a childcare centre with nearly 100 spots to provide before and after-school care.⁴⁰ In addition, construction has begun on the Dogwood Lodge long-term care home in Vancouver. The \$50.7M care home will have 150 beds and should be complete by spring 2023.⁴¹ Looking forward, the province will be providing \$31.2M for seismic upgrades to two schools in Richmond. Construction will begin in 2022 and is scheduled to finish mid-2023.⁴²

Meanwhile, the province's investments in several infrastructure projects across the region are progressing. Construction of the \$1.4B Pattullo Bridge is expected to resume this summer,⁴³ whereas work has already begun in preparation for construction of the \$2.8B Broadway SkyTrain extension.⁴⁴

Employment in **Thompson-Okanagan** is comparable to one year ago, yet positively the unemployment rate decreased to 7.3%.⁴⁵ The region's residential construction sector is beginning to show more activity. Green Square Vert development in Kelowna has broken ground on the final phase of its project, with two condominiums to be completed by summer 2022.⁴⁶ In addition, two affordable rental projects are moving forward—construction of a 29-unit complex in Vernon has already begun, with a 46-unit complex in Oliver expected to begin in the coming months.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, construction has begun on the Gordon Drive extension in Kelowna. The \$10.8M project is to be completed by summer 2022.⁴⁸

The region's tourism sector continues to face challenges. Earlier this year, Hockey Canada announced that it would be cancelling its spring championships due to the pandemic, including the Centennial Cup scheduled in Penticton.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Big White Resort, near Kelowna, is now closed for the season due to the rising surge of COVID-19 cases.⁵⁰

Employment within the **Kootenay** region increased by 6.2% over the year, yet the unemployment rate also increased to 6.7% as more people entered the labour force (+5,500).⁵¹ On a positive note, construction is underway on thirty affordable townhomes in Invermere. Half of the homes will be made available to low-income families and seniors, while the other half will be available to women and children leaving violence.⁵² Meanwhile, a new childcare facility is to be constructed in Castlegar and is expected to open in September 2021. The facility will offer 30 daycare spaces, and an additional 20 pre-school and after-school spaces.⁵³

Looking forward, the province will invest \$33.6M to replace Glenmerry Elementary school in Trail with a new building that will seat up to 435 students. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2022 and be completed by the fall of 2024.⁵⁴ In addition, the province and the Southeast Kootenay School Board are funding an 80-seat expansion at Isabella Dicken Elementary School in Fernie. Construction on the school is expected to begin later this fall, with classrooms ready for students by September 2022.⁵⁵

Over the year, employment in **North Coast and Nechako** increased by 6.0%, yet the unemployment rate increased to 8.5% as roughly a quarter of the people who entered the labour force remained unemployed.⁵⁶ The region's employment outlook is expected to improve over the coming months, as the LNG Canada and Coastal GasLink projects were approved to gradually increase their on-site workforce. Earlier this year, a COVID-19 public health order limited the workforce on several megaprojects in the region, including the LNG Canada, Coastal

GasLink, and Rio Tinto Kemano projects.⁵⁷ In addition, the hydropower plant in Klemtu will undergo a \$5M upgrade and refurbishment in order to increase its capacity and reliability.⁵⁸

For now, the province of B.C. is providing \$25M towards the expansion of the Port of Prince Rupert. In addition to other public and private funding, a new 28-hectare transload platform will be created, including the installation of new rail tracks and storage facilities. Once complete, the project is expected to create 200 jobs in transloading and an additional 2,000 jobs in transportation and warehousing.⁵⁹

Compared to a year ago, employment within **Northeast** remained relatively unchanged, and the unemployment rate increased slightly to 4.1%.⁶⁰ Employment across the region should improve, particularly as the province announced in February its commitment to move forward on the Site C Hydroelectric project. The multi-billion dollar project was under review due to several challenges, including rising costs, and construction delays due to the pandemic. The project's revised cost is \$16B with completion delayed from 2024 to 2025.⁶¹

The region's utilities sector will also benefit with \$40.5M in federal funding, for the Clarke Lake Geothermal Development Project located near Fort Nelson.⁶² The project owners, Fort Nelson First Nation, plan to offer employment and training opportunities to its members.⁶³

With the booming U.S. housing market, the health of the region's forestry sector may improve as Louisiana Pacific announced plans to restart production at its Peace Valley oriented strand board mill in Fort St. John later this year. The mill was curtailed in June 2019 due to a decline in U.S. housing starts and low OSB prices. Nearly 200 mill workers and hundreds of contractors lost their jobs when the mill closed.⁶⁴

***Note:** In preparing this document, the authors have taken care to provide clients with labour market information that is timely and accurate at the time of publication. Since labour market conditions are dynamic, some of the information presented here may have changed since this document was published. Users are encouraged to also refer to other sources for additional information on the local economy and labour market. Information contained in this document does not necessarily reflect official policies of Employment and Social Development Canada.*

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For information on the Labour Force Survey, please visit the Statistics Canada Web site at: www.statcan.gc.ca

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