



# Labour Market Bulletin

British Columbia

September 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

In September, employment in British Columbia was above pre-pandemic levels by a wider margin than any other province (+1.5%). This is remarkable because this quarter the province dealt with one of the worst wildfire seasons on record and renewed public health measures to combat a fourth wave of the pandemic. It is likely that the province's avoidance of strict lockdown measures that were necessary in previous waves resulted in a stronger economic response. This was reflected in a boost in employment in hard-hit industries. For example, employment in **accommodation and food services** grew 11.3% over the quarter. Finally, the **Lower Mainland – Southwest** region led the province in employment growth at 10.9% over the quarter – where borders re-opened to vaccinated travellers from the U.S. and overseas.

Employment grew each month this quarter, with the highest increase in September at 0.4%.<sup>1</sup> The province's unemployment rate improved to 6.2% (-0.7%) from the previous quarter. Much of the growth occurred in part-time employment (+4.0% or +23,200 jobs) rather than full-time employment (+0.7% or 14,800 jobs). Year-over-year employment increased 7.4%.

The quarter began with a move into Step 3 of the COVID-19 restart plan. The mandatory mask mandate order was lifted, travel restrictions within the province were removed, and limits on indoor and outdoor dining were eased.<sup>2</sup> However, the fourth wave prevented the planned move into the final step of re-opening. There is reason for cautious optimism in final three months of the year as vaccines for younger segments of the population start rolling out. The caution stems from increased indoor activities in the winter months, conducive to the spread of viruses, and the persistence of the delta variant.

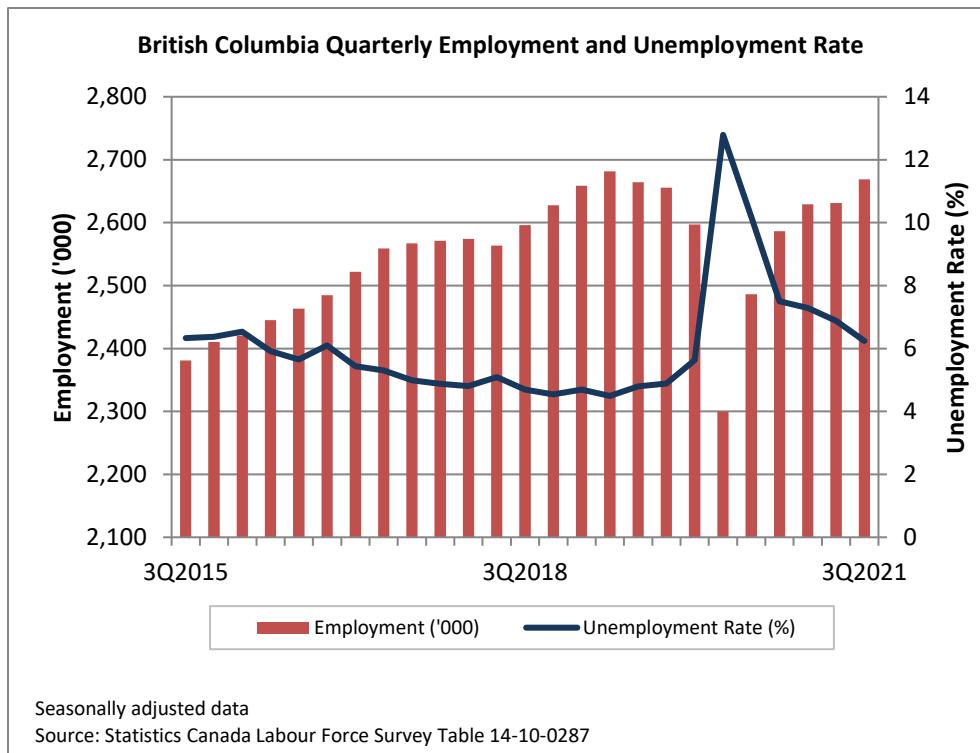
B.C. also endured one of the worst wildfire seasons on record. There were more than 1600 wildfires over the course of the season. The wildfire in White Rock Lake was the worst of the fires, covering approximately 833 square kilometers, destroying 78 properties, and prompting more than 800 insurance claims worth about \$77M.<sup>3</sup>

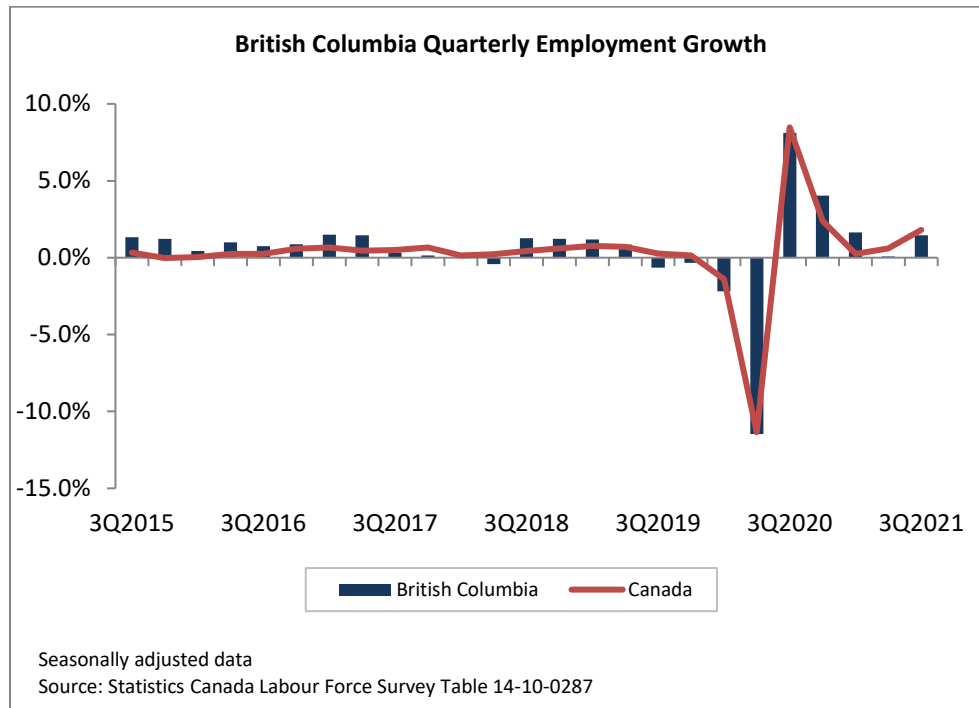
**British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics**

Seasonally adjusted data	3rd Quarter 2021	2nd Quarter 2021	3rd Quarter 2020	Quarterly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
<b>Population 15 + ('000)</b>	4,357.4	4,334.7	4,307.2	22.7	0.5	50.2	1.2
<b>Labour Force ('000)</b>	2,846.4	2,825.2	2,767.9	21.2	0.8	78.5	2.8
<b>Employment ('000)</b>	2,668.9	2,630.9	2,486.0	38.0	1.4	182.9	7.4
Full-Time ('000)	2,068.0	2,053.2	1,931.5	14.8	0.7	136.5	7.1
Part-Time ('000)	600.9	577.7	554.5	23.2	4.0	46.4	8.4
<b>Unemployment ('000)</b>	177.5	194.3	281.9	-16.8	-8.6	-104.4	-37.0
<b>Unemployment Rate (%)</b>	6.2	6.9	10.2	-0.7	-	-4.0	-
<b>Participation Rate (%)</b>	65.3	65.2	64.3	0.1	-	1.0	-
<b>Employment Rate (%)</b>	61.2	60.7	57.7	0.5	-	3.5	-

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 in B.C. improved greatly over the year (-4.0 percentage points), as significantly fewer people were unemployed (-104,400). The unemployment rate for B.C.'s youth (15 to 24 years) was 10.6% in the second quarter of 2021, a slight improvement (-1.2 percentage points) from the previous quarter. Women accounted for all of the gains in the youth unemployment rate this quarter (-2.8 percentage points to 10.5%).

This quarter the youth recovery outpaced that of the 25 years and older population, where the unemployment rate was 5.5%, a decrease of 0.6 percentage points compared to last quarter, and -3.0 percentage points compared to last year. The gap in unemployment rate between men and women that was characteristic of the early pandemic was mostly closed by this quarter.

#### British Columbia Quarterly Unemployment Rates, by Gender and Age

Seasonally adjusted data	3rd Quarter 2021 (%)	2nd Quarter 2021 (%)	3rd Quarter 2020 (%)	Quarterly Variation (% points)	Yearly Variation (% points)
<b>Total</b>	6.2	6.9	10.2	-0.7	-4.0
<b>25 years and over</b>	5.5	6.1	8.5	-0.6	-3.0
Men - 25 years and over	5.7	6.3	8.7	-0.6	-3.0
Women - 25 years and over	5.4	5.8	8.2	-0.4	-2.8
<b>15 to 24 years</b>	10.6	11.8	20.8	-1.2	-10.2
Men - 15 to 24 years	10.6	10.5	21.5	0.1	-10.9
Women - 15 to 24 years	10.5	13.3	20.0	-2.8	-9.5

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 overall goods producing sector was stable over the second quarter of 2021. However, there were significant job losses in **agriculture** (-35.5%), and **utilities** (-18.1%). The job losses were offset by gains in **forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas industry** (+14.1%) and **manufacturing** (+4.5%). Overall employment in the goods sector remained relatively stable over the year (-0.5%).

Several factors contributed to the job losses (-10,900) in **agriculture**. Wildfires and drought damaged crops and caused losses in livestock herds.<sup>4</sup> On top of curtailed operations, the agricultural regions of the province also dealt with outbreaks of COVID-19 and associated challenges recruiting workers.

Employment in the **construction** industry was down slightly compared to a year ago (-0.7%); and up slightly compared to last quarter (+0.7%). New housing starts declined in the quarter, in-line with normal seasonal falloff. However, new housing starts are still up 3.2% in the province compared to last year, which is a notable increase compared to the country as a whole (-4.9%).<sup>5</sup> However, the sudden spike in building permits earlier this year has since eased, and year-over-year, the value of building permits declined 7.5% in August. Over the 12-month period, the value of permits is still up 26%, led exclusively by residential construction (+51%).<sup>6</sup> According to the Conference Board of Canada, the industry is experiencing a shortage of skilled tradespeople and will continue to deal with this shortage as retirements outpace new hires over the next several years.<sup>7</sup>

At this time, work continues on several major industrial projects across B.C., including the \$6.6B Coastal GasLink pipeline and the \$12.6B TransMountain pipeline. Meanwhile, the Province announced several multi-million dollar school upgrades and affordable housing projects across the province. Looking ahead, the Metro Vancouver area will benefit from two major public transportation projects, the ongoing \$2.8B Broadway Sky Train extension, and the recently announced \$3.8B Surrey-Langley Sky Train extension.

The **forestry** sector continues to adapt to ongoing challenges, including wildfires, trade tariffs from the United States (U.S.) and a shrinking timber supply. After several months of historically high lumber prices, they dropped sharply in the month of June as supplies increased and demand eased.

Many sawmills in the interior curtailed production over the summer months. Canfor and Interfor both temporarily curtailed production due to wildfires, and Canfor and Conifex followed suit due to volatile market conditions.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup> However, by the end of the quarter lumber prices returned to historically normal levels. Recent price increases indicate that the price floor may have been hit in August. An uptick in housing starts and construction activity will contribute to market stability and should mean fewer curtailments moving forward.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. is Western Canada's largest customer for dimensional lumber used in home framing construction, and demand in America remains strong as a result of fewer pre-owned homes on the market.

Following the escalation of old-growth logging protests on Vancouver Island, the Provincial government is honouring the request by the Pacheedaht, Huu-ay-aht and Ditidaht First Nations to defer logging in the Fairy Creek Watershed and the Central Walbran Valley for two years. The Province aims to ensure sustainability and competition across the sector, including participation with local communities.<sup>13</sup> There may be difficulties on the

horizon after the courts denied an extension to an injunction that prohibited protests from blockading forestry activities in the area.<sup>14</sup> The protest is now considered the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history.<sup>15</sup>

Year-over-year, B.C.'s **services** sector employment increased by 9.3% to over 2.1M jobs. Job growth occurred in all industries in the sector, particularly in industries that have adapted to the ongoing health restrictions such as **business, building and other support services** (+19.2%) **information, culture and recreation** (+16.8%), **public administration** (+14.7%), **health care and social assistance** (+13.8%) and **professional, scientific, and technical services** (+12.0%). **Accommodation and food services** experienced the least growth over the year, mostly maintaining previous levels (+0.1%).

On a quarterly basis, however, **accommodation and food services** employment increased sharply (+11.3%) corresponding with eased public health restrictions over the quarter. While the province is now in Stage 3 of its Restart Plan, the fourth wave of the pandemic prompted some public health measures to be re-instated. One of the main strategies to deal with the fourth wave is a proof of vaccination system for public spaces, which appears to be mitigating the need for lockdowns that were used to curb infections in previous waves.

The longer-term outlook for the industry is positive. However, many businesses in the industry have reported staff shortages since health restrictions eased in July. These shortages caused businesses to limit operating hours or capacity, even when demand returned. If these shortages continue, the recovery in this industry will lag behind others.<sup>16</sup> Vaccination requirements eased international travel restrictions, and the return of cruise ships into Vancouver in November provide some optimism that demand for accommodation and food services will be more stable over the next several months.<sup>17</sup>

Employment in **business, building, and other support services** includes jobs such as administrative facilities, call centres, and occupations that keep buildings in operational order such as janitorial, landscaping, and carpentry services. As workers returned to the office this summer, many businesses made changes to the workplace to protect workers from the ongoing threat of COVID-19. Workers in this industry were needed to retrofit offices with new safety equipment such as hand sanitizer and more physical barriers, as well as more frequent cleaning schedules, which all led to a jump in yearly employment.<sup>18</sup>

The **professional, scientific, and technical services** industry continued its upward trend from last year. According to the Conference Board of Canada, the province is undergoing a hiring boom and a shortage of skilled workers is causing companies to turn their attention to international talent.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, 13 BC technology businesses reached a valuation of \$1B or more over the past year.<sup>20</sup> These so-called “unicorn” companies are rare in the sense that there are thousands of technology start-ups every year, but very few that reach a \$1B valuation.<sup>21</sup> In response to the increase in demand for labour in the tech industry the provincial government launched the Innovator Skills Initiative Program, aimed at providing more than 3,000 opportunities for workers from under-represented groups to join the industry.<sup>22</sup>

## British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics, by Industry

Seasonally adjusted data ('000)	3rd Quarter 2021	2nd Quarter 2021	3rd Quarter 2020	Quarterly Variation		Yearly Variation	
				Number	%	Number	%
<b>Total employed, all industries</b>	2,668.9	2,630.9	2,486.0	38.0	1.4	182.9	7.4
<b>Goods-producing sector</b>	478.3	488.2	480.9	-9.9	-2.0	-2.6	-0.5
Agriculture	19.8	22.1	30.7	-2.3	-10.4	-10.9	-35.5
Forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas	50.2	53.1	44.0	-2.9	-5.5	6.2	14.1
Utilities	17.2	21.3	21.0	-4.1	-19.2	-3.8	-18.1
Construction	215.8	214.4	217.3	1.4	0.7	-1.5	-0.7
Manufacturing	175.5	177.3	167.9	-1.8	-1.0	7.6	4.5
<b>Services-producing sector</b>	2,190.6	2,142.7	2,005.1	47.9	2.2	185.5	9.3
Trade	400.8	396.9	376.8	3.9	1.0	24.0	6.4
Transportation and warehousing	139.6	138.2	133.7	1.4	1.0	5.9	4.4
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	171.3	169.0	162.2	2.3	1.4	9.1	5.6
Professional, scientific and technical services	259.5	261.9	231.6	-2.4	-0.9	27.9	12.0
Business, building and other support services	110.0	107.5	92.3	2.5	2.3	17.7	19.2
Educational services	186.4	184.9	173.6	1.5	0.8	12.8	7.4
Health care and social assistance	368.3	352.6	323.7	15.7	4.5	44.6	13.8
Information, culture and recreation	125.3	125.7	107.3	-0.4	-0.3	18.0	16.8
Accommodation and food services	181.8	163.3	181.6	18.5	11.3	0.2	0.1
Other services	111.0	111.3	103.2	-0.3	-0.3	7.8	7.6
Public administration	136.5	131.6	119.0	4.9	3.7	17.5	14.7

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 is beginning to lessen, as employment in most regions increased over the last year. Indeed, the recovery in the labour force helped unemployment rates to decline in all the regions, with the lowest unemployment rate in **Vancouver Island and Coast** at 5.2% (-4.3 percentage points). This success likely reflects an adaptable pandemic response plan and relatively high vaccination rates in the province. However, a surge in cases of COVID-19 towards the end of the quarter threatens economic recovery. Indeed, the government imposed new restrictions in the **Thompson – Okanagan** region as cases increased.

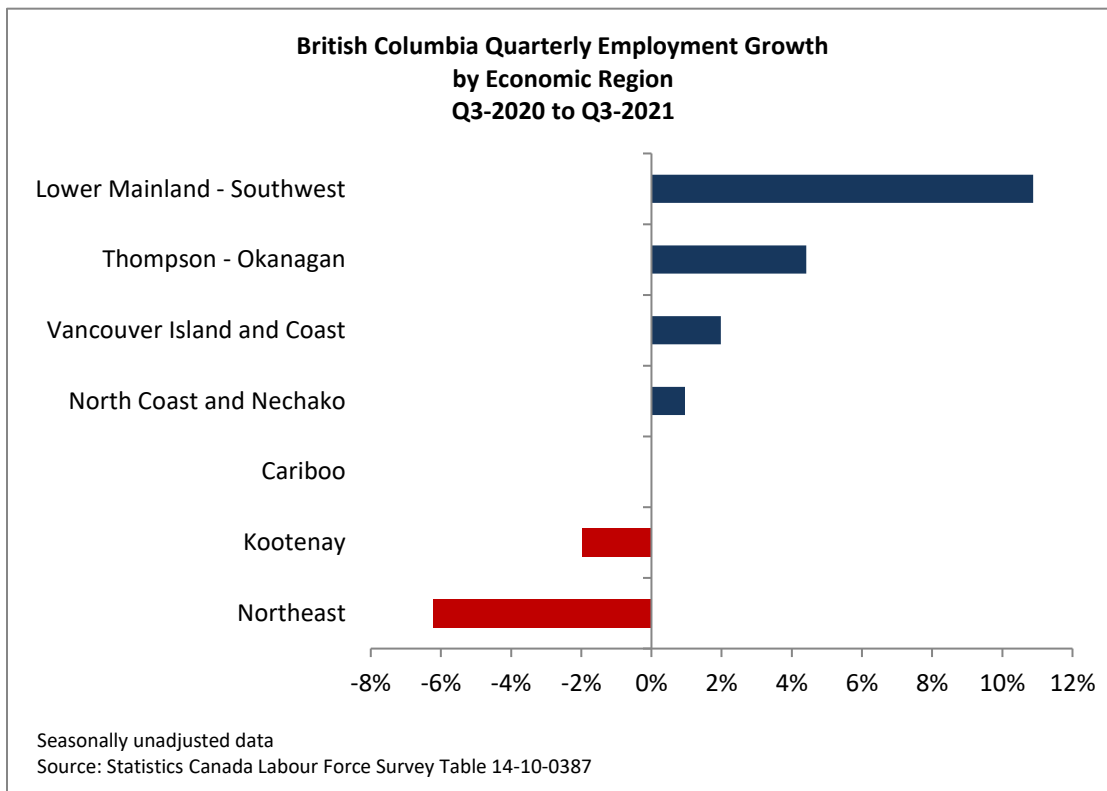
The data for the economic regions are not seasonally adjusted and should only be compared on a year-over-year basis. Employment is sometimes influenced by seasonal and calendar effects occurring at the same time and with the same magnitude every year, which can bring about changes in the data that make quarterly comparisons difficult.

## British Columbia Quarterly Labour Force Statistics, by Economic Region

Seasonally unadjusted data	Employment			Unemployment Rate		
	3rd Quarter 2021 ('000)	3rd Quarter 2020 ('000)	Yearly Variation (%)	3rd Quarter 2021 (%)	3rd Quarter 2020 (%)	Yearly Variation (% points)
<b>British Columbia</b>	2,692.0	2,505.5	7.4	6.5	10.3	-3.8
<b>Economic Regions</b>						
Vancouver Island and Coast	418.0	409.9	2.0	5.2	9.5	-4.3
Lower Mainland - Southwest	1,725.0	1,555.8	10.9	7.0	10.9	-3.9
Thompson - Okanagan	305.4	292.5	4.4	5.4	9.0	-3.6
Kootenay	79.5	81.1	-2.0	6.5	9.1	-2.6
Cariboo	85.9	85.9	0.0	6.3	10.7	-4.4
North Coast and Nechako	42.1	41.7	1.0	7.9	9.0	-1.1
Northeast	36.2	38.6	-6.2	5.7	7.2	-1.5

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. Employment improved by 2.0% compared to what it was a year ago, and the unemployment rate is 5.2%, down 4.3 percentage points from 9.5%. Tourism in the region got a boost from U.S. and international travellers that were allowed back into the country for the first time since the pandemic began.<sup>23</sup> Also, BC residents travelled to the Island, as travel restrictions eased and wildfires in the Provinces' interior discouraged visitors. However, staff shortages in tourism-related industries such as accommodation and food services are hampering the economic recovery. For instance,

businesses in Tofino report that workers left the industry while lockdowns were in place, and continued border restrictions for international workers is suppressing the labour supply.<sup>24</sup>

Other industries also struggle with labour shortages and layoffs. Physicians are in short supply on the island; causing or threatening to cause medical clinics to close in the midst of the pandemic.<sup>25,26</sup> Also, cannabis company Tilray Inc. announced that the production facility and offices in Nanaimo will permanently close, leaving around 300 employees looking for work.<sup>27,28</sup>

The province's recovery rests largely in the **Lower Mainland – Southwest**. Year-over-year, the region led the province in job growth, adding 169,200 jobs (+10.9%). Indeed, the strong outlook for the region's construction industry continues. The province recently announced a \$4.15B replacement to the George Massey Tunnel on Highway 99, with preliminary improvements to the transit and cycling infrastructure on the highway to begin this fall.<sup>29</sup> Construction also began this quarter on the 2.6-kilometer tunnel section of the Trans Mountain pipeline in Burnaby, and the Burrard sky train station in Vancouver will shut down for two years while upgrades are completed.<sup>30,31</sup>

The region's tech sector is also ramping up, having produced at least six technology companies worth \$1B or more in 2021.<sup>32</sup> The region is also set to build a \$50M vaccine-manufacturing site that will boost jobs in the professional, scientific, and technical services industry.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Disney Animation Studios is opening a new office in the region in January 2022,<sup>34</sup> and the feature animation division of DNEG is looking to add an additional 100 workers.<sup>35</sup>

Employment in **Thompson-Okanagan** increased by 4.4% over the year and the unemployment rate decreased by 3.6 percentage points to 5.4%.<sup>36</sup> Despite one of the worst wildfire seasons that the province has experienced, the summer construction season contributed to the increase in employment. The region is benefitting from projects such as the \$230.3M widening of the Trans-Canada highway near Chase<sup>37</sup>, and several housing projects including a 650-unit building in Kelowna.<sup>38</sup>

However, surging cases of COVID-19 affected employment in tourism and agriculture the region this quarter. Reinstated public health measures and travel advisories due to wildfires left the hotel occupancy rate at 35.5%, the lowest point that it has been through the whole pandemic.<sup>39</sup> COVID-19 is also being blamed for a labour shortage at Apple Orchards and vineyards this harvest season, with up to 40% fewer workers this year.<sup>40</sup>

Employment in the **Kootenay** region declined 2.0% over the year, and the unemployment rate dropped by 2.6 percentage points to 6.5%. Several road and infrastructure improvements are now underway, including construction of a \$6.2M replacement bridge spanning the Kaslo River along Highway 31. Construction on the bridge is to be finished by the end of the year.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, construction has begun on the \$10M installation of 120km of fibre optic infrastructure between Playmor Junction to north of Nakusp. Work on the project is expected to last until spring of 2023.<sup>42</sup>

Severe wildfires made for a tense summer in the region, resulting in temporary curtailments in August.<sup>43</sup> However, Castlegar's forestry sector is improving, despite some temporary curtailments in August. Interfor is spending \$35-million project to improve productivity at its mill. The company will be rebuilding and replacing their planer mill, which is expected to be complete by July 2022.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the Federal government will be



funding \$4.5M in equipment upgrades to improve fibre processing at the Mercer Celgar Pulp Mill. Once complete, the upgrades will help address regional fibre supply issues.<sup>45</sup>

Over the year, employment in **North Coast and Nechako** increased by 16.1% (+6,100) to 44,000 workers, and the unemployment rate was reduced by nearly half to 7.0% as more people found work and entered the labour force (+3,200).<sup>46</sup> The region's labour market improved due in part to work ramping up on the LNG Canada and Coastal GasLink mega-projects. The outlook for the region's construction and transportation industries appears bright, as the Pembina Pipeline Corporation has partnered with the Haisla Nation for the proposed Cedar LNG Project in Kitimat. If approved, the project is expected to create 500 temporary jobs during construction. A final investment decision is set for 2023.<sup>47</sup>

For now, the region is also benefitting from several other small-scale projects, including construction on a number of buildings at Coast Mountain College in Terrace. The \$35M project includes new student housing, as well as renovations to the library, and academic and registration hub.<sup>48</sup>

Compared to a year ago, employment within **Northeast** decreased by 6.2% to 36,200, while at the same time the unemployment rate decreased 1.5 percentage points to 5.7%.<sup>49</sup> Employment losses in the region were exclusively in the services sector (-16.9% year-over-year). Nevertheless, the Site C Hydroelectric project continues to ramp up its onsite workforce. There were more than 4,800 workers on the Site C project in May 2021.<sup>50</sup> That number increased to 5,108 workers for the month of July – an increase of 6.4%.<sup>51</sup> Approximately \$70M of mechanical work has also begun on the project.<sup>52</sup>

The province's natural gas sector is making headway in the region, as Cryopeak LNG Solutions opened its new natural gas production facility in Fort Nelson. The facility will provide natural gas to remote northern communities and industrial customers, such as mining operations.<sup>53</sup> Fort Nelson also added construction work to the area with \$40M in resurfacing of sections of the Alaskan Highway.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Louisiana Pacific restarted their Peace Valley OSB Mill in Fort St. John after indefinitely curtailing production in 2019 due to insufficient market demand.<sup>55</sup>

***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.*

**Prepared by:** Labour Market Information (LMI) Directorate, Service Canada, British Columbia

**For further information,** please contact the LMI team at: [http://www.esdc.gc.ca/cqi-bin/contact/edsc-esdc/eng/contact\\_us.aspx?section=lmi](http://www.esdc.gc.ca/cqi-bin/contact/edsc-esdc/eng/contact_us.aspx?section=lmi)

**For information on the Labour Force Survey,** please visit the Statistics Canada Web site at: [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)

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