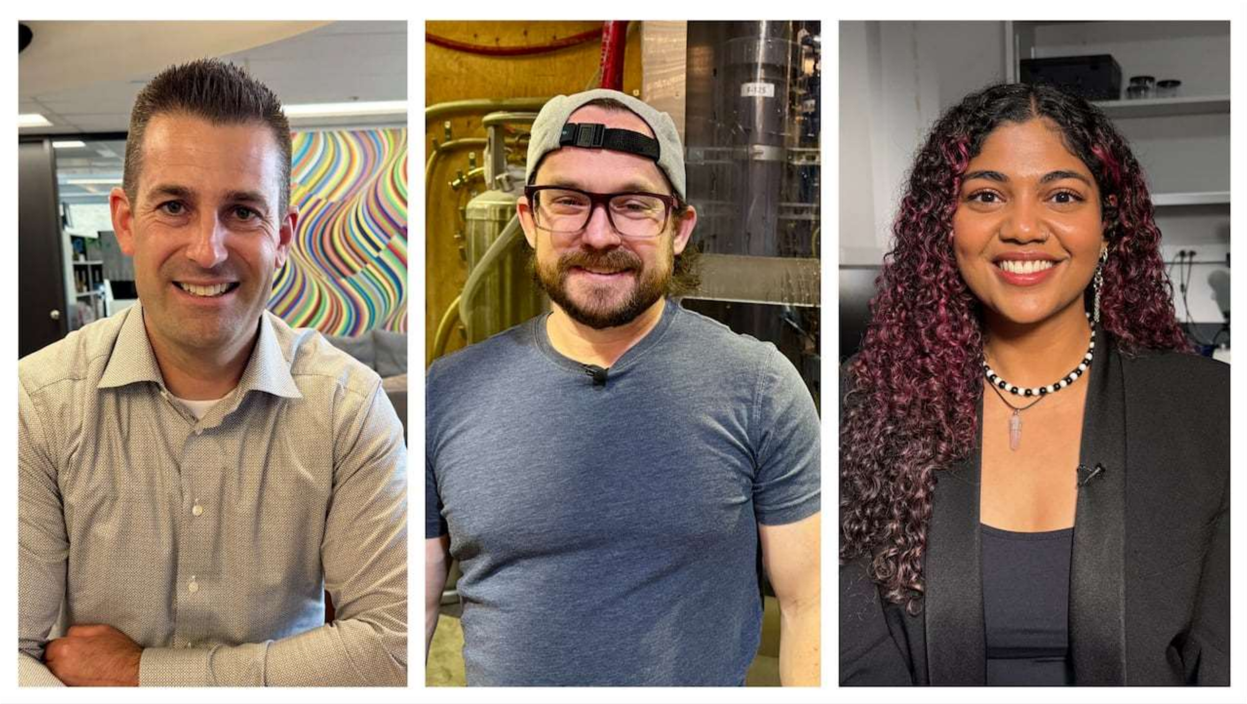
Help wanted: The oilpatch will need 72,000 workers over the next decade

Demand for workers will be even higher if construction begins on major projects

Kyle Bakx, Ina Sidhu · CBC News · Posted: Jun 11, 2026



Joshua Anhalt, Kent Swanlund, and Aleisha Cerny each describe the excitement of working in the oil and gas sector because of the opportunities, transferable skills, and job security it can provide. (Ina Sidhu/CBC)

Canada's oil and gas sector is facing a major hiring challenge.

The industry will need about 72,000 workers by 2035 — the majority to replace retiring employees, according to a new report by Careers in Energy, a division of Energy Safety Canada.

The number could climb well above 100,000 positions needed if proposed major energy projects like pipelines move forward in the coming years.

The plethora of hiring opportunities comes as the economy struggles and there is uncertainty in some industries because of the impacts of U.S. tariffs and artificial intelligence.

At the same time, the country is grappling with one of the worst job markets for young people in decades. The oilpatch offers high-paying jobs and a variety of positions, from welders and mechanics to salespeople and engineers. Still, some require working in remote locations, and not all jobseekers may be interested in a career tied to oil and natural gas.

“The energy sector really is growing and evolving and we're faced with a big challenge,” said Lisa Stephenson, director, Careers in Energy.

“We do know that trades and engineers and technical workers are going to be needed; they’re going to be the most in demand."

A rig crew works at the site of a natural gas well near Stettler, Alta. (Kyle Bakx/CBC)

In the oilpatch, the labour crunch is expected to begin around 2027, she said, as retirements accelerate. Without enough workers, Stephenson said the country may struggle to deliver on federal aspirations of being a reliable, global source of oil and gas and becoming an energy superpower, in both clean and conventional energy.

Canada’s oilpatch directly employed 192,500 people in 2025, and employment is projected to reach 210,900 by 2035.

Across the economy, 5,400 jobs are created for every $1 billion spent developing and constructing energy infrastructure projects, according to Careers in Energy.

AI-protected

For Joshua Anhalt, 45, one of the industry's biggest advantages is that many jobs remain difficult to automate.

"Until we get to the point where robots are building the robots and fixing the robots, we still need to build the robots," said Anhalt, CEO of MBrace Energy, a small business in Calgary that aims to increase production from aging oil and gas wells.

"The human brain is still quicker, faster and our fingers are more ambidextrous than any other compute platform out there."

That may be welcome news for the many young Canadians struggling to land a job, let alone begin a career.

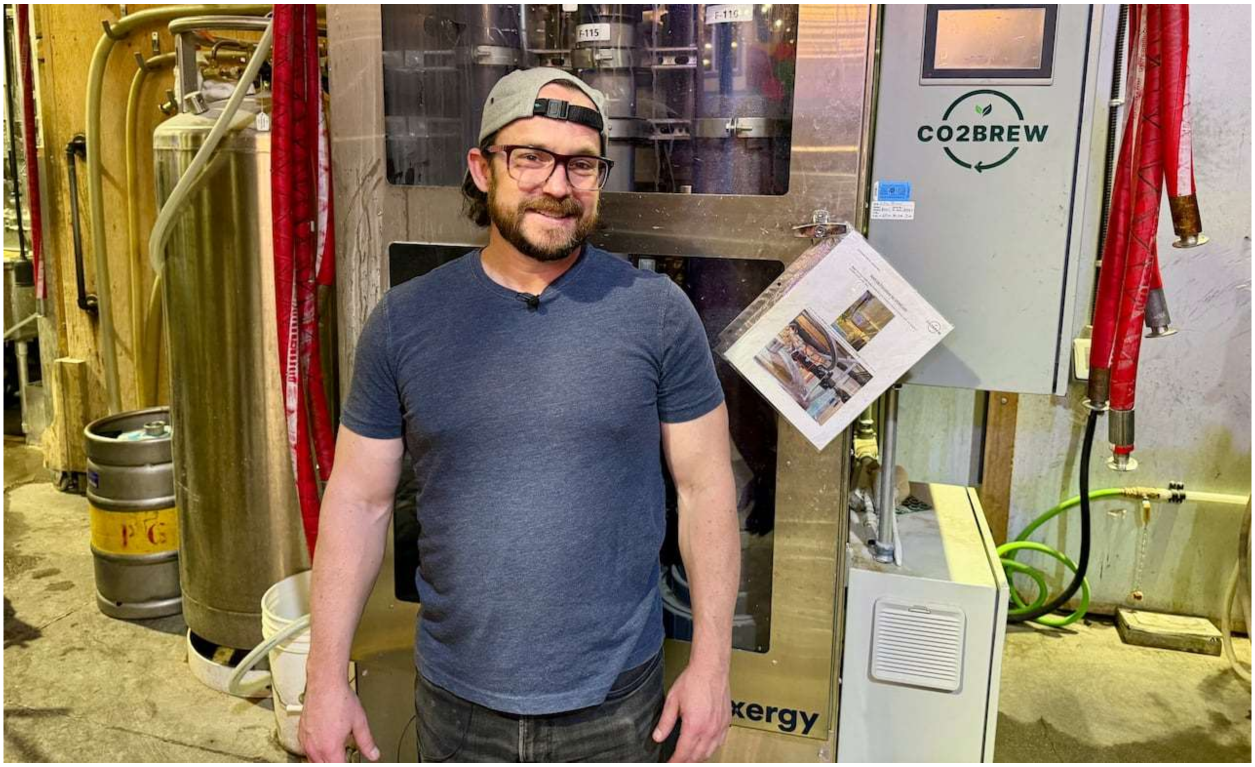
While the unemployment rate for Canadians aged 15 to 24 fell to 13.4 per cent in May, it remains roughly double the national rate.

Pros and cons

Yet attracting younger people has been a persistent challenge for the energy sector, largely due to concerns about remote work, work-life balance and the industry's environmental reputation.

That's in spite of the industry's higher salaries, the average of which reached more than $170,000 in 2024, more than double the Canadian average of just over $78,000, according to the report and Statistics Canada data.

For some, a career may start in energy before leading to opportunities well beyond the sector.



After beginning his career in the oilpatch as a chemical engineer, Kent Swanlund now applies those skills and knowledge to a startup involved in the beer business. (Ina Sidhu/CBC)

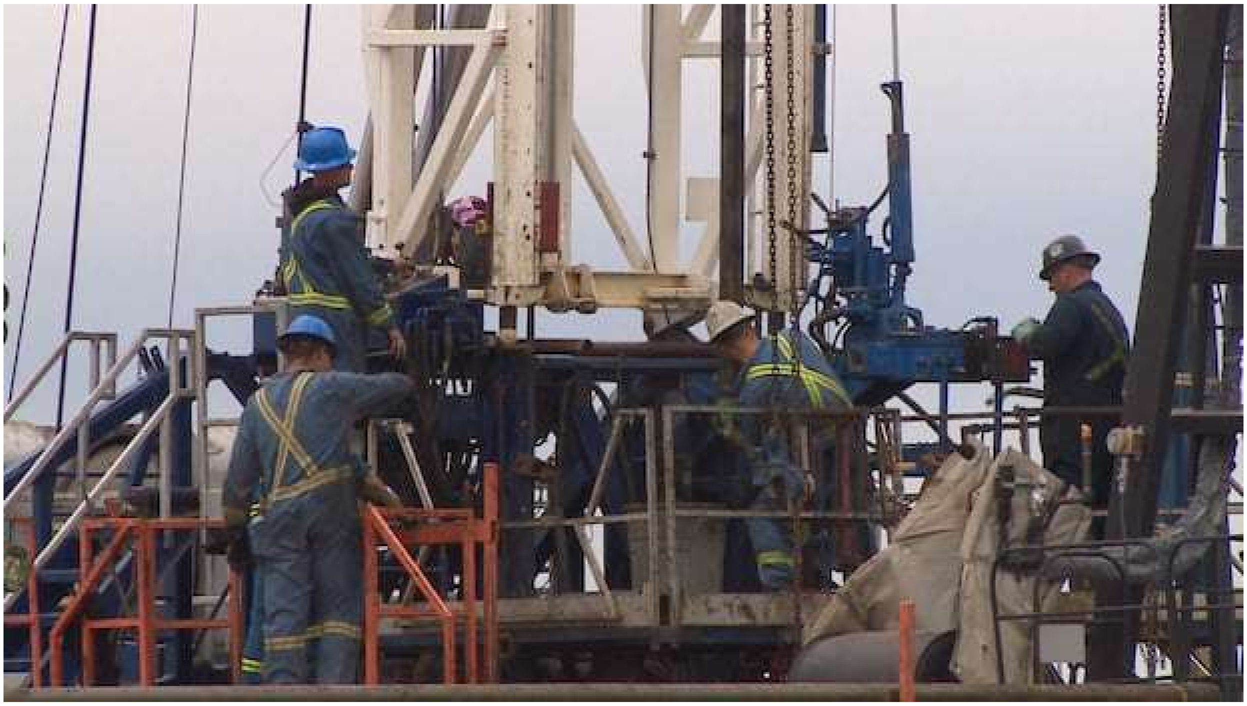
Kent Swanlund, 45, spent years working as a chemical engineer in Alberta, including in sales and in developing carbon capture projects for oilsands companies.

Skills and experience in the oilpatch are highly transferable, he said, whether you're working directly on oil rigs or have an office job in a downtown Calgary office tower.

Swanlund now manages CO2Brew, a startup he co-founded that captures carbon dioxide produced during beer fermentation and converts it into reusable, beverage-grade CO2.

"Around 80 per cent of breweries can become self-sufficient with a system like this, meaning they never have to buy CO2 ever again," he said. "They're already producing what they need to run their operation."

Swanlund said his experience helped him develop the technical and business skills needed to launch a company that is now attracting interest from around the world.



According to a new report from Careers in Energy, Canada's oilpatch will need tens of thousands of workers over the next decade, even as many young people struggle to find employment. But attracting the next generation may mean changing how they see the energy business.

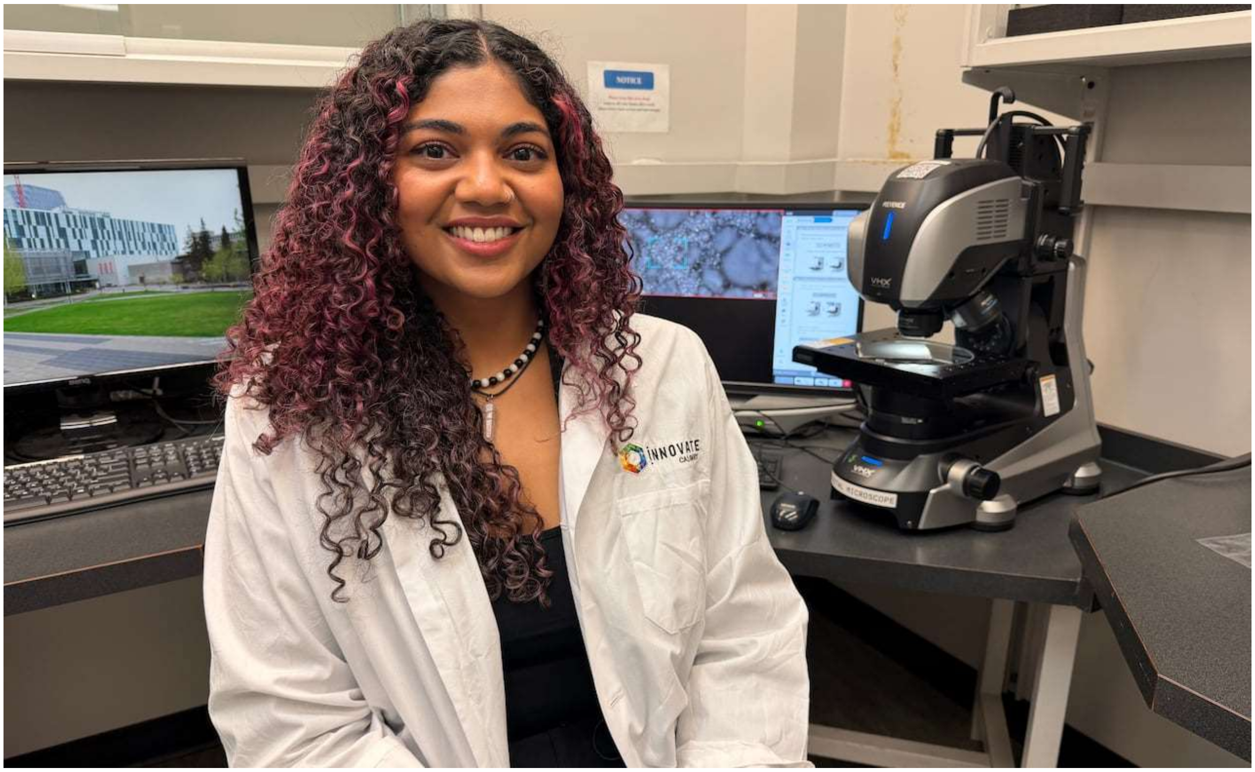
Climate considerations

Over the last decade, some colleges and universities cut some oil and gas-related programs because of low enrolment. Some have since returned as student interest has increased.

The industry is also known for its booms and busts, as commodity prices are notoriously volatile.

Aleisha Cerny, 30, never thought she would work in the energy sector, let alone move to Alberta, as she did six months ago.

Growing up in Toronto, she was a climate activist who took part in protests and felt the world needed to shut down the use of fossil fuels.



Aleisha Cerny is co-founder of Serenity Power, which is developing fuel-cell technology designed to generate electricity more efficiently for remote facilities. (Ina Sidhu/CBC)

“My passion was always climate change. I was always passionate about renewable energy, and that's what actually pushed me to study materials engineering,” said Cerny.

Her company is developing fuel-cell technology designed to generate electricity more efficiently than conventional diesel generators, to help power remote, industrial buildings like oil and gas facilities and data centres.

She always thought about energy as black and white. Now, though, her perspective has changed.

“I didn't realize that for us to actually make a meaningful impact and transition towards cleaner technologies, that we're going to have to work together," she said.

“Now that I'm actually in [the energy sector], things are much more nuanced, much more complicated. And it takes collaboration."

A career in energy is exciting, she said, because there is so much opportunity as the infrastructure and technology evolve.

Warren Mabee, director of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Policy at Queen's University, said many young Canadians want to know how the industry aligns with their values.

“They've been hearing about the climate crisis and they've been hearing about environmental issues for their entire lives,” Mabee said. “They want to know that they're contributing to solutions and not contributing to problems.”

At the same time, he said younger workers recognize the importance of the energy sector to Canada’s economy and are paying attention to how technology is reshaping the industry.

“Right now, they can see what the impacts of a slowdown in oil exports or oil imports does to the economy. They can see that being part of the industry might be attractive."