



Issues Background

Importance of Seasonal and Temporary Foreign Agricultural Workers to Ontario

Updated: March 27, 2020

Issue related to COVID-19:

- Ontario farmers are struggling to get skilled international essential labour to help plant, grow and harvest crops for the 2020 season. This is an issue affecting Ontario's food security.
- About 8,000 seasonal and other temporary workers are working in Ontario right now, primarily in greenhouses.
- About 4,600 more workers were scheduled to arrive by mid-April when travel restrictions were put in place on March 18, 2020. An additional 8,800 workers are expected by mid-June.
- Spring work includes pruning fruit trees and planting crops. If these skilled essential workers are not in Ontario at the beginning of the season to help with spring work, there will not be a crop to harvest later in the season.
- Where possible, farmers always prefer to hire Canadian employees first, even in a normal season, there is a significant gap in terms of availability of local help. The work requires skilled labour. Many employees have been returning to the same Ontario farm for years and are very familiar with the work.
- Areas where fruit and vegetables are imported from, like California and Florida, are also dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and the same issues with essential, skilled labour meaning that even imports could also be in short supply if there is a failure of the local crop.
- The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association (OFVGA) appreciates the work of the Government of Canada to ensure the arrival of this much needed labour force.
- Farmers are willing to follow strict pre-screening, monitoring and quarantine protocols. Protecting the health of Canadians and farm workers is a key priority.
- Despite government assurances of a solution, there continue to be challenges related to:
 - Logistics for flying the workers to Canada
 - Restrictions on workers' ability to work during their 14-day isolation period upon arrival at their farm of employment
 - Housing for the employees with restrictions that they should maintain a two-metre distance at all times (most of these employees live in farm-owned shared lodgings)



- OFVGA is one of many key industry associations providing input to the government for its consideration as it seeks to find solutions to these issues in a way that balances public health and food security for Canadians.
- There are a disturbing number of reports about essential services refusing entry to seasonal agricultural workers who have already been in the province for some time. There is no need to treat these workers any different than Ontarians practicing self-isolation during the COVID-19 crisis. Workers are being asked to follow social distancing requirements, monitor for symptoms, and ensure proper personal hygiene.

Background

Fruit and vegetable production is very labour-intensive as many crops must be planted and/or harvested by hand. They also have very specific – and often short – planting or harvesting seasons so sometimes a lot of work has to be done very quickly.

In order to make sure fruit and vegetable farms had a steady work force, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) began in 1966 when a group of 264 Jamaican workers arrived in Ontario to harvest apples. Today, the program is available to only five countries, as stipulated in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT): Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean Islands.

If Canadian horticultural farm employers can't find suitable Canadian employees, they can employ foreign workers through this program, which provides them with a much-needed, reliable labour source. The SAWP is a government-approved program and is the biggest of a number of agricultural temporary foreign worker programs available to Canadian employers.

If Canada's horticulture sector didn't have access to these essential seasonal and other temporary farm workers, over one half of the Canadian horticulture market would be lost to imports – and many popular but labour-intensive crops like tree fruits, potatoes, asparagus, greenhouse vegetables and berries could no longer be grown here. This also applies to the processing vegetable sector and crops like tomatoes, cucumber, sweet corn, green beans, carrots, cauliflower, cabbage, beets, peppers, pumpkin, squash, lima beans and onions that are fresh frozen or go for further processing.

For more information:

- Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services - www.farmsontario.ca
- Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association - <https://www.ofvga.org/covid-19>



- Canadian Horticulture Council - <https://www.hortcouncil.ca/en/projects-and-programs/awareness-campaign-on-international-farm-workers/facts-and-key-messages-about-international-farm-workers/>

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