



A FARMER'S COMMITMENT:

**Putting food
on your table.
Keeping our
workers safe.**

An open letter to the people of Niagara Region

My name is Ray Duc and our family farm has been growing grapes and tender fruit in Niagara-on-the-Lake since 1960. Forrer Farms was founded by my wife Linda's parents; today, we farm with our son Jeffrey, and his two children are the fifth generation to live on the home farm.

We have 10 seasonal international employees as well as four full-time and six part-time local employees who help us grow wine grapes for Arterra Wines. We also grow peaches and cherries for local fruit markets and restaurants.

The international workers arrived on our farm in the winter, and even though that was ahead of the travel restrictions imposed to curb the pandemic, they still completed a quarantine period before starting work on our farm.

We've taken many other steps to protect our employees, including: limiting unnecessary visitors to the farm, supplying masks, hand cleaner and surface sanitizer, and reducing the number of people who go to town every week for groceries.

We've also supplied additional vehicles to move around the farm so we can respect proper physical distancing, and international employees work completely separately from our local staff. We also do a verbal health check with everyone every morning before work is started.

Our farm employs international workers through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), which was set up in the 1960s by the Canadian government and the governments of partner countries to provide employment and assure fruit and vegetable growers of a reliable workforce. It's very strictly regulated and unlike other temporary worker programs, it's only available to fruit and vegetable farms.

The men and women in this program have the same protections and benefits as local employees, including minimum wage, health care, and employment insurance. The employee housing we provide, which includes multiple kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms, is inspected annually by the local health unit. We can't even apply to participate in SAWP until we've met all the requirements.

On our farm, some employees have been coming to Niagara for over 30 years and our farm is part of their lives, just like they are part of ours. And coming to Canada means they can support families and communities back home with housing, healthcare, businesses and post-secondary education.

One of the realities of the pandemic is that COVID-19 can affect anyone and even with precautions in place, outbreaks are happening, including on farms. But as we learn more about recent farm outbreaks in Ontario, our industry is working quickly to address problems and prevent them from reoccurring.

We know, for example, that some of those outbreaks were linked to the use of unregulated local recruitment agencies whose contract workers moved from farm to farm.

Growers can all help reduce community spread by limiting movement of local temporary workers from one farm to another and, like on our farm, by making sure local and international employees work apart from each other. Getting workers tested is important, as is making sure they know they have job and income protection if they have to go into isolation. And our industry organization, the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association, is working with all levels of government to provide COVID-19 health and safety protocols and training for growers.

International workers are valuable members of our community; for many of us, they're an extension of our own families. They're also an essential link in Ontario's horticulture industry, playing a vital role in growing our fruits and vegetables, and I'm proud that our farm is part of providing food for Canadians.

Ray Duc, grape and tender fruit grower
Niagara-on-the-Lake

