



# ACCESS TO LABOUR

## INTRODUCTION

Access to labour is essential for food security and the success of the Canadian agriculture sector. BCAC supports the use of foreign workers only when there are no Canadians willing or available to do the work. It is vital that all workers operate in a safe and rewarding environment and that their rights are respected and promoted.

## THE ISSUE

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian agriculture industry faced a pervasive and persistent labour shortage. A significant part of farm labour is seasonal in nature. As most workers prefer full-time employment, finding enough domestic workers and limiting turnover is challenging.

To alleviate some of this strain, the Government of Canada created the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) to allow for the recruitment of foreign workers under certain conditions. TFWs first came to British Columbia (B.C.) in 1984 and numbers have increased steadily since then. COVID-19 and the increasing shortage of workers in all sectors has further highlighted the critical importance of addressing workforce issues for the essential role of local food production in Canada.

## KEY POINTS

- Encouraging more British Columbians to work in agriculture will contribute to the sustainability of farming and ranching in the province.
- Temporary foreign workers (TFWs) are an invaluable resource for farmers and ranchers who continue to face challenges with the domestic labour shortage.
- Employers need to adapt to changing societal expectations around employment.

## BACKGROUND

Labour shortages have hurt B.C. financially and continue to restrict the profitability and growth of the province's agriculture sector. In 2017, B.C.'s agriculture sector was unable to fill 3,100 jobs or approximately 8% of workforce needs. This contributed to lost revenues of about \$216 million in 2018, a higher share of lost revenues due to labour shortages than in any other province.

This labour gap is primarily driven by the seasonal nature of agricultural work, whereas most domestic workers prefer full-time, year-round employment. Declining numbers of unpaid family workers and own account farmers have also been contributing factors. Farm employers have increased real farm wages for domestic workers and continue to invest in mechanization, but these measures have not historically attracted domestic workers. Due to the significant and growing number of job vacancies, B.C. farmers and ranchers have sought foreign workers to mitigate the labour shortage.

## THE SOLUTION

The National Workforce Strategy for Agriculture and Food and Beverage Manufacturing provides a roadmap for action to address the workforce challenges experienced by the agriculture sector. These tools can be adopted in B.C. or drawn upon to inform a provincial strategy.

The agriculture sector is also seeking support from all levels of government to ensure that labour policies, particularly related to the recruitment of foreign workers, are responsive to farm employers' needs. This includes dedicating more resources to the processing of LMIA's and other related application materials, providing quarantine accommodations and supports when such quarantine is required by public health needs, and adopting legislation or regulations that streamlines the recruitment and entry requirements of foreign workers where appropriate.



## WHAT COULD GOVERNMENTS DO?

- Future program changes must consider the needs of both the employer and the employee, which includes such considerations as the health and safety of workers, competitiveness and the economic viability of farming, job satisfaction, and the flexibility to create jobs that people want.
- Promoting collaboration across levels of government and different Ministries that encourages employment in the agriculture sector.
- Collaborate with industry to identify opportunities to support farmers in addressing the labour shortage, such as industry-led efforts like the National Workforce Strategy.

## WHAT IS BCAC DOING?

- Providing representation to national labour committees or working groups, such as those organized by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), the Fruit and Vegetable Growers of Canada, and the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC), as well as to the regional and national meetings of the TFWP.
- In the last three years BCAC incorporated a new entity, the Western Agriculture Labour Initiative (WALI) to focus completely on the labour shortage. Three full-time staff are dedicated to assist the sector in accessing TFWs and improving working conditions for workers. WALI plans to expand services to encourage Canadian residents' desire to work on B.C. farms and to support employers develop human resource management skills.
- Participating in career fairs to promote employment opportunities in the agriculture sector.
- BCAC and WALI have established a Labour Committee to coordinate industry input on agricultural labour policy issues ([link](#)).
- BCAC is part of the housing inspection process for worker housing dedicated to agricultural production and has advocated for provincial mid-season inspection of housing as a quick way to improve the overall quality of worker housing.
- Contributing to efforts by CAHRC, the Future Skills Centre, CFA, and Food and Beverage Canada to develop a National Workforce Strategy for Agriculture and Food and Beverage Manufacturing ([link](#)).