

March 15, 2024

Hon. Lisa Beare
Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills
Government of British Columbia
PO Box 9080 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Sent via Email: PSFS.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Subject: BCAC on Farm Apprenticeship Programs

Dear Minister,

On behalf of British Columbia's farmers and ranchers, I am writing to extend sincere congratulations on your appointment as Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills. This role is important to the future prosperity and growth of our province and many of its communities.

As you may know, BC Agriculture Council (BCAC) is the lead industry advocate for sector-wide priorities in our province. Our mission is to grow a strong, sustainable, and competitive agriculture sector through building industry consensus and advancing public policy. We achieve this by delivering a unified voice for the sector to government through the 28 unique commodity associations we represent. In turn, approximately 20,000 farm families who hold membership in these associations generate 96% of farm gate sales in B.C.

At the previous Agriculture Day, held in October 2023, I and other representatives of the agriculture sector met with your predecessor in this role. In that meeting, your Ministry expressed an interest in supporting one or more pilot apprenticeship programs that could address challenges in filling certain roles critical to farm operations while also helping to upskill British Columbians interested in a career in agriculture. Indeed, according to recent forecasting from the Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council (CAHRC), farm employers will be short more than 35,000 workers by 2030. This lack of skilled domestic labour means that farm employers in B.C. and elsewhere in Canada increasingly rely upon the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, with CAHRC reports indicating the most significant increases among greenhouse and dairy operations in recent years.

In the October 2023 meeting, BCAC committed to engage with our membership to develop proposals for these apprenticeship programs, which would combine classroom learning with work experience. We are pleased to have completed that work and share the results with you. It is our hope that your Ministry will consider providing the necessary funding for pilots of these apprenticeship programs, with a view to their becoming integral to B.C.'s agricultural workforce development in future years and a cherished learning opportunity for new generations of farmworkers.

Dairy Production Technician

For the dairy sector specifically, the only recognized apprenticeship program has historically been offered by Greenbelt Veterinary Services Ltd. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding, their Dairy Production Technician Level 1 (DPT1) program has not been offered since the 2019-20 program year. This program involved approximately 160 hours of classroom learning and practical training over six months, primarily held at the University of British Columbia's Dairy Education and Research Centre in Agassiz but with some training also provided at Greenbelt Veterinary Services' own facilities in Chilliwack.

The DPT1 program curriculum covers a broad variety of topics, including the effective operation of milking equipment as well as its cleaning and maintenance, safety in animal handling, the identification of common diseases, mastitis treatment, hoof health, obstetrics, the role of cow comfort in reproduction and best practices in ensuring successful reproduction, record keeping, and on-farm practices necessary to adhere to the dairy sector's regulatory program, known as proAction.

New Workers in Landscape and Nursery

Regarding greenhouse and nursery growers, which account for the largest portion of the shortfall in skilled labour forecasted by CAHRC for 2030, our member BC Landscape and Nursery Association (BCLNA) previously delivered an apprenticeship program, but this was also suspended some years ago due to a lack of available funding. We believe that this program could be re-introduced with funding from your Ministry, using the GROW Training for New Workers program offered by Landscape Ontario as a model. GROW provides approximately 160 hours of online learning and hands-on training over four weeks. The curriculum, which would be adapted to the B.C. context, includes softscape installation and maintenance techniques, plant identification, fundamental principles of horticulture and floriculture, safe tool and equipment use, and general workplace safety. Due to the time intensiveness of this training and that it is primarily intended for new workers, GROW is offered by Landscape Ontario free of charge to apprentices thanks to funding from the Government of Ontario, and a B.C. equivalent would need to do the same with funding from our province to be successful.

Inventory Control Specialist

In addition, greenhouse and nursery growers would benefit from the establishment of a pilot apprenticeship program for inventory control specialists or managers. Inventory control is one of the most specialized and essential roles in a successful greenhouse, nursery, or floriculture operation, but growers have also found it to be one of the most difficult to fill from the domestic workforce. This work requires strong theoretical and practical knowledge of horticultural science, such that the worker can quickly and visually identify when plants will be ready for market, as well as if there are serious deficiencies in the growth of a plant and what steps can be taken to address those deficiencies. Workers who are currently successful in such roles combine this skill with meticulous recordkeeping, so that sales staff and other members of the team have the timely information necessary to provide customers with the best quality product.

Unfortunately, the current program offerings from the School of Horticulture at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), such as the Diploma in Horticulture Technology, place too great a focus on the tools and technologies used in cultivating horticultural crops and not enough on horticultural science and recordkeeping. The Landscape Horticulturalist and Arborist Technician apprenticeship programs offered by that institution are important, but the B.C. agriculture sector would benefit greatly from an Inventory Control Specialist program with funding from your Ministry, whereby classroom learning is delivered through select courses in plant health from KPU and practical training is made available by BCLNA and the United Flower Growers. This would address the skills gap on inventory control in B.C.

In summary, **we would appreciate your kind consideration of extending funding support for the establishment of the following three apprenticeship program pilots:**

- Dairy Production Technician, delivered by Greenbelt Veterinary Services
- Training for New Workers in Landscape and Nursery, delivered by BC Landscape and Nursery Association
- Inventory Control Specialist, delivered by BC Landscape and Nursery Association and United Flower Growers, in partnership with Kwantlen Polytech University

Such funding support would be quite limited in comparison to the costs typically associated with certificate or diploma programs offered by B.C. post-secondary institutions.

We have provided this information in response to the earlier interest expressed at Agriculture Day and in the hope that it may be useful to you as you work to deliver on the commitment in the mandate letter from the Premier to “lead work to recruit and retain people to build a skilled and flexible workforce in B.C.’s changing economy...”

I would be happy to meet with you or relevant staff from your Ministry to further discuss these proposed programs and how best to facilitate their launch or relaunch. To coordinate such a meeting or obtain additional background information, please do not hesitate to contact Danielle Synotte, BCAC’s Executive Director, via email at dsynotte@bcac.ca or via telephone at 604-854-4483.

Thank you once again for your interest in ensuring the labour needs of the agriculture sector are met, and I look forward to our any future opportunity to collaboratively advance the sustainability of farming and ranching in our province!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'J. Woike', with a large, stylized loop at the end.

Jennifer Woike
President, BC Agriculture Council

CC:

Hon. Pam Alexis, Minister of Agriculture and Food
Hon. Brenda Bailey, Minister of Jobs, Economic Development, and Innovation
Hon. Harry Bains, Minister of Labour