

Temporary Foreign Worker Program COVID-19 Agri-food Risk Management Plan Executive Summary

ISSUE

On Monday, March 16, the federal government confirmed that, as a result of enhanced border closures to contain COVID-19, no further Temporary Foreign Workers will be able to enter Canada as of March 18, 2020.

This closure will have a devastating impact on Canada's food supply and food security.

Canada's primary agriculture sector alone relies on access to approximately 60,000 international farm workers to help address a persistent labour shortage of more than 76,000 workers each year. Initial estimates suggest approximately 10,000 workers are in Canada to date, representing only a small fraction of the workers needed to plant labour-intensive crops like fresh fruit and vegetables.

Moreover, the food supply chain's need for international food workers extends well beyond the farmgate. Significant shortages continue to affect processing capacity in Canada, both in primary and secondary processing. Without access to international food workers, the Canadian food processing industry will be challenged to continue meeting the needs of Canadians. For example, over 1,200 international food workers are employed in primary meat processing, with additional vacancies still constraining capacity. Access to these labourers is critical to the continuity of Canada's food supply chain and the viability of Canadian farm businesses.

The agri-food sector submits the following proposal that would carve out a targeted exemption from border restrictions ensuring the supply of essential agri-food workers, while maintaining compliance with the recommendations of Canada's public health agencies.

PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

Our first priority is the health of Canadians. Enforcing and maintaining public health protocols is of the utmost importance to all farm and food employers and the proposals articulated below aim to ensure all workers entering Canada respect existing public health protocols and associated requirements. Farmers and food businesses across Canada support the government as it does its best to navigate these unprecedented times. We recognize the need to take every reasonable precaution to address the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and want to help.

Foreign workers are an essential element to Canada's agricultural production and food manufacturing. Losing them will impact Canada's food supply in both the short and long term through potential food shortages and/or significant price increases that undermine food security and sovereignty. For example, in 2018, the \$2.4 billion in farmgate fruit and vegetable sales would largely not have been produced without access to this critical labour source. Meanwhile, many grain producers would not be able to plant their crops without labour certainty, leaving farmers unable to produce their products and potentially losing long-term viability for future production.

All types of farmers, from produce to livestock, processors and food manufacturers, and the fish and seafood sector rely on access to appropriately skilled workers to enable them to effectively plant, produce, harvest, care for their livestock, and process their products for Canadians. Without sufficient certainty that workers will be available for the start of the rapidly approaching season and throughout the year, the entire agri-food supply chain will experience looming shortages in products ranging from: fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen and canned), meat products, fish and seafood products, and a range of other food products.

It is imperative for our food supply that all possible efforts be made by the Government of Canada to retain agriculture and processing workers already in Canada through common sense, streamlined processes.

As a country we are already dependent to a large extent on US imports of these products, and there is no certainty that access will remain if the US were to face similar labour challenges and/or focus their food supply towards meeting its domestic needs first.

The inability to access this critical source of farm and food labour holds the potential to threaten Canadian food security, creating undue panic and uncertainty amongst the general population, while threatening the viability and continuity of the food supply chain both in the short and long term.

PROPOSAL

Provincial Agricultural Ministers from across Canada have identified their support for measures that would facilitate access to agri-food TFWs.

We propose the following measures be taken:

1. The prohibition on foreign travellers to Canada be amended to include an exemption for agri-food workers who otherwise qualify under the conditions of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), on the basis that they are essential workers.
2. Extend Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIAs) and work permits for those workers already in Canada through an expedited process that would allow them to stay in Canada and continue working in agriculture and agri-food. In addition, retention of the existing workforce needs to be a priority.
3. Streamline worker transfers between operations to optimize the contributions of the existing labour TFW workforce in Canada. Employers are committed to working collaboratively with their workers and other approved farm and food businesses to transfer and/or share workers to address pressing needs.

To achieve the exemption identified in recommendation, the Canadian agri-food industry has identified a number of key challenges and opportunities to mitigate those concerns through joint industry-government actions. (See **Temporary Foreign Worker Program COVID-19 Agri-food Risk Management Plan** for more details)

CONCLUSION

Our first priority is the health and safety of Canadians. Enforcing and maintaining public health protocols is of the utmost importance to all farm and food employers and the proposals articulated below aim to ensure all workers entering Canada respect existing public health protocols and associated requirements. Farmers and food businesses across Canada support the government as it does its best to navigate these unprecedented times. We recognize the need to take every reasonable precaution to address the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and want to help. We believe our proposal achieves this.

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS:

Canadian Federation of Agriculture
Food and Beverage Canada
Canadian Produce Marketing Association
Canadian Horticultural Council
Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers
Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
Dairy Farmers of Canada
Canadian Honey Council
British Columbia Agricultural Council
Union des producteurs agricoles
FARMS
National Cattle Feeders Association
Mushrooms Canada
FERME
Food and Beverage Ontario
Canadian Meat Council
Lobster Processors Association of New Brunswick & Nova Scotia
Canadian Poultry and Egg Processors Association
Food and Beverage Atlantic