

Feeding Canada Together: How Farmers and International Workers Grow Our Food



When Canadians visit grocery stores or sit down for a meal, few stop to consider the people behind the food on their plates. Among them are thousands of international workers who play a vital role in Canadian agriculture each year. Their contributions, alongside Canadian farmers and domestic workers, help ensure that fresh, safe, and high-quality food reaches our tables.

A Longstanding Partnership

Canada's agriculture sector has relied on international labour for more than 50 years. Programs like the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the broader Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) were created to help farmers address persistent labour shortages, particularly during peak growing and harvesting seasons.

From the beginning, the goal has been straightforward: hire Canadians first. Farmers consistently try to recruit locally, but agriculture faces unique challenges. Rural areas have small labour pools, and the reality is that not many Canadians are willing to relocate for jobs that are seasonal and physically demanding.

When those hiring efforts fall short, international workers help fill the gap, ensuring crops are harvested on time and animals receive proper care. Today, roughly 60,000 temporary foreign workers support Canadian farms annually, highlighting how essential the program has become.

Why Labour Shortages Persist

Agriculture is unlike most industries. It operates on tight timelines dictated by weather and biology. Crops cannot wait, and livestock require daily care. Even short-term labour shortages can lead to significant losses if they happen in a critical time-frame, affecting both farm viability and food supply.

Despite the use of foreign worker programs, agriculture still has the highest job vacancy rate of any industry in Canada (7.4%). This underscores how acute the labour gap remains, and why these programs are seen as critical to keeping farms operational.

Experience That Builds Over Time

One of the most compelling aspects of the TFWP and SAWP is the long-term relationships they foster. Many workers return to the same farms season after season, sometimes for decades. These workers support not only the farmers they work for, but also the local rural economies where they are employed.

Over time, these workers gain specialized knowledge about Canadian farming practices, equipment, and crops. They become highly skilled contributors who farmers depend on not just for labour, but for expertise.

For many farms, these returning workers feel like extended family. Stories abound of workers attending family milestones, being welcomed into communities, and maintaining lifelong connections with their employers.

Strong Rules and Protections

The Temporary Foreign Worker Program is governed by strict federal requirements designed to ensure fairness and safety. These include:

Equal pay: International workers must be paid the same as Canadian workers for the same job.

Work permits with limits: Workers are authorized for defined periods (up to 2 years under TFWP, or 8 months under SAWP, with the ability to return).

Employer responsibilities: Farmers must meet standards around working conditions, transportation, and housing.

These rules are intended to protect workers while supporting farms that genuinely need labour.

Addressing Concerns and Misconceptions

Like any large program, the TFWP has faced scrutiny. Concerns often focus on employers who mistreat their employees, housing conditions, or whether the program is being used to suppress wages for Canadian workers.

These concerns are taken seriously. Governments conduct inspections, enforce penalties for non-compliance, and continue to refine program rules. It's important to recognize that while isolated issues do occur, they do not reflect the practices of the vast majority of Canadian

farmers, who value their workers and follow program requirements.

While CFA can't comment on the use of the program in urban areas with large labour pools, in agriculture this program is an absolute necessity to obtain the workers required to fulfill the demands of food production. Without access to labour, many farms would scale back production, or shut down entirely, reducing domestic food supply and increasing reliance on imports.

A Shared Future in Food Production

At its core, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is about partnership. It connects skilled, motivated workers with farms that need their help. The program supports rural economies, strengthens food security, and fosters cross-cultural exchange.

For consumers, this means greater access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other agricultural products grown right here in Canada.

For farmers, it means keeping their businesses viable in the face of ongoing labour challenges.

And for workers, it offers opportunities to earn income far greater than they can achieve at home, gain experience, and build lasting relationships.

The Bigger Picture

As Canada's population grows and food demand increases, the need for a stable and reliable agricultural workforce will only become more pressing. While innovation and automation will play a role, people, both domestic and international, will remain at the heart of farming.

The Temporary Foreign Worker Program is not without its challenges, but it is also a story of collaboration, resilience, and shared success. Behind every harvest are teams of individuals from all over the world working together to help feed a nation.