



LONG-TERM THINKING FOR TODAY'S ISSUES

September 28, 2022

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

1341 Baseline Road

Ottawa, ON, K1A 0C5

Via email: aafc.AGLS-SMAG.aac@agr.gc.ca

Re: National Agricultural Labour Strategy

Dear Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada,

The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO) is an Accredited Farm Organization representing the interests of over 4,000 farm families in Ontario who are called to the vocation of farming. CFFO policy promotes economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable farming, advocating that farmers receive fair return for their production and stewardship efforts.

The economic impact of the current labour shortage in agriculture is significant. However, it is not only the lost opportunity or the wasted food that we should consider. There is a significant mental health impact from the challenges farmers face in getting and retaining workers, or from lack of reliable access to a veterinarian. Addressing labour issues is complex and requires cooperation between industry and many ministries and levels of government.

CFFO Recommendations:

- Ensure documentation for new arrivals is processed efficiently to allow them to enter the workforce.
- Provide online training for farm-employers on how to apply to hire Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs).
- Promote on-farm mentorship training, student internships and co-op placements.
- Promote (more) direct farm experience in fields such as veterinary medicine or application of new technologies.
- Support ongoing research and trials “in the field” to help bring labour-replacing solutions to market more quickly.

Challenges for Farmers

The challenge of hiring and retaining workers on farms is not new. However, the marketplace and policy environment do impact the specific challenges farmers face.

Below are some key challenges relating to farm labour shortages:

- Many farmers are not able to offer full-time, dependable hours.

- Farmers are competing to attract workers with better paying or more consistent local jobs.
- Profit margins are low – this does not allow for competitive wages, discourages hiring and limits training opportunities.
- Low wages, unpredictable hours and seasonal work result in poor worker retention, less qualified workers, lack of training and lack of experience.
- Regulations are limiting access to labour-saving crop protection products.
- Lack of farm-related specific skill sets – e.g., working with farm animals, operating specific machinery, farm mechanics or working in the bush.
- Farm-related skills and knowledge are lacking in sectors that support agriculture, such as veterinary medicine and technological innovation.
- Regulations designed for large operations with many employees are often a deterrent or hurdle for farmers looking to hire on a smaller scale.
- Negative impacts on the mental and physical health of farmers and current workers who are overworked or unable to take breaks or vacations.

Farm Size Considerations

Government policies need to consider how to effectively support young and new farmers to get a foot in the door and start farming businesses. While some commodities are more labour-dependent, in other cases the size of farm may contribute to the demand for hired labour. These new entrepreneurs are competing with larger farm operations for access to land and other key resources. Where more new farming entrepreneurs are successful, some of the hired-labour demand may be mitigated.

Government policies relating to labour need to consider the viability of family-run farms who employ a small number of employees. Small and middle-sized farms are less likely to employ temporary foreign workers and can be important training grounds for new farmers and locally-based farm workers. Regulations designed for large operations with many employees can become a significant hurdle and even a deterrent for those farmers looking to hire on a smaller scale.

It is also important to ensure policies and programs treat farms of all sizes fairly. Small and middle-sized farms should have equal opportunity to benefit from government programs and need government policy and programs that will be effective for their needs.

Recommendations for Solutions

The CFFO recommends government focus on three key areas to help address the challenges faced by agriculture in meeting labour needs; ensuring government programs support the agricultural workforce, improving training and education, and support research and innovation related to labour-replacing technology.

Government Programs

New arrivals to Canada, be they Refugees or those seeking Permanent Resident status, are often eager to enter the workforce. The government needs to ensure that there are no delays in properly processing the required documentation to allow those interested to enter the workforce in a timely manner.

The CFFO also recommends that the government provide online training for farm-employers on how to apply to hire TFWs. This should include an outline of recently implemented changes happening under the Temporary Foreign Worker program reform, as they apply to farms.

Training and Education

Farmers see education in agriculture as a key long-term solution to the farm labour issue. Starting early will get students interested in farm-related jobs, teach them the skills and work ethic needed, and promote the value of farm work.

On-farm mentorship training, student internships and co-op placements help workers gain experience and connect farmers with interested students. This direct farm training is important, as mentioned earlier, not only for on-farm jobs, but also in fields that may be farm-related, such as veterinary medicine or application of new technologies.

Technology

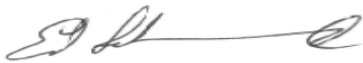
While some farm-related work will continue to require skills only humans can provide, there is significant opportunity for labour-replacing technology in agriculture. In the current Canadian labour context, the benefits of technological solutions are clear for many farmers. However, the process of developing and implementing these solutions can be long and costly. Ongoing research and trials “in the field” need to be supported by government in order to help bring solutions to market more quickly.

Conclusion

The CFFO calls on government to consider agricultural labour policies that will better support farm workers, improve farm-related training and education and support ongoing research and trials to bring labour-replacing technology to market. The success of new farming entrepreneurs and of farm-employers with a small number of employees need to be considered in regulations and program design.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide input and thank you for your consideration of our concerns and comments.

Sincerely,



Ed Scharringa, President
Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario