

# TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN CANADA

*Educators' Resource*



# INTRODUCTION

Canadian farms grow over 125 kinds of nutritious, safe and delicious fruits and vegetables each year. But did you know that this would not be possible without the skills, expertise and hard work of international farm workers?

Fruit and vegetable farming in particular is very labour-intensive, requiring many people to help plant, manage, and harvest the crops. Most bruise or damage easily, so they still need to be cultivated and picked by hand. Unfortunately, on-farm agriculture has the **highest job vacancy rate of any industry in Canada at 5.4 percent.**

Canadian farmers who can't find enough local or domestic employees rely on workers from other countries to work on their farms. They come to Canada under various programs, like the **Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program (SAWP)** or under the **Canadian Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP)**. Most foreign workers that come to Canada are through SAWP, while the rest come under other program streams of the TFWP.

Workers come from countries like Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and other Eastern Caribbean nations and stay in Canada for defined periods, such as the growing season, before going home for the winter months. The money they earn helps take care of their families and support their communities back home. In some cases, they've been able to set up businesses at home that create local jobs, and send their children to university. It is very common for workers to return to the same farm year-after-year and have mastered the skills to effectively and efficiently prune fruit trees, harvest asparagus and much more.



[Canadian Horticulture Council](#)  
[Heartbeat: A celebration of international farm workers](#)

Temporary foreign workers have been part of Canadian agriculture for over 50 years. Canadian farmers are able to fill critical jobs on their farms in order to grow food for Canadians. The workers have meaningful jobs and earn more money than they would be able to at home, while receiving the same employment standards and occupational health and safety protections as Canadian farm workers do.

**Without their help, many farmers wouldn't be able to grow the fresh, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables that are available to Ontarians year-round.**



# FAQ

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A “MIGRANT WORKER” AND “TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER” OR “SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKER”?

Often workers who come to Canada from another country to work seasonally on a farm are colloquially referred to as “migrant workers.” However, this term more accurately applies to migratory agricultural workers often seen in countries like the United States, where workers travel from farm to farm following the different crops as they come into harvest in different regions.

In Canada, temporary foreign workers hired through the SAWP or other temporary worker program arrive in Canada and typically work on one farm for the duration of their stay, often returning to the same farm season after season.

**Some workers have been returning to the same farm for over 30 years, and not only have become highly skilled at what they do but also beloved members of the farm family.**



[FarmFood360°  
Seasonal Agricultural Workers in Canada  
- An Employee Perspective](#)



## WHY DON'T FARMS HIRE CANADIANS TO DO THIS WORK?

Where possible, farmers always prefer to hire Canadian employees first. In fact, they must make a demonstrated effort to recruit and retain Canadian workers first before being allowed to hire temporary foreign workers. However, the seasonal and physically demanding nature of farm work, as well as the fact that most Canadians live in urban centres far from the farms where workers are desperately needed, makes these positions chronically difficult to fill.

These jobs are time-sensitive - they revolve around seasonal crop cycles, fluctuating weather, and the crops themselves are perishable. This means that farmers need employees during peak periods to avoid devastating losses. Temporary foreign workers help fill this critical labour gap, but even with these additional employees, farms continue to have vacancies that cannot be filled. To ensure that Canadians always have the first opportunity at these positions, all jobs filled by foreign workers are advertised locally before farmers are permitted to hire a foreign worker.



## WHERE DO SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS LIVE?

All workers have access to housing provided by their employer. Most workers receive housing for free as part of their employment contract while working in Canada. Some workers may have to pay a modest rent, but this has to be approved by the federal government. Often housing is located directly on the farm where the workers work, although sometimes they also live in nearby towns.

All housing is inspected every year by certified municipal or provincial health inspectors. During the pandemic, inspections increased substantially to make sure farms were following new health and safety rules. Farms made many changes to ensure that housing limited health risks related to the pandemic, including having fewer workers live together to ensure they could keep the right physical distance.



## HOW MUCH DO SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS GET PAID?

Employers must pay workers the highest of three rates: the province's minimum wage, a standard seasonal agricultural rate determined by work type and set by Employment and Social Development Canada, or the rate an employer would otherwise pay a Canadian worker doing the same job. **This is the law.**

For the temporary workers, the opportunity to earn Canadian wages is a welcome way to supplement low incomes and limited employment available in their home countries.



## WHAT PROGRAMS AND REGULATIONS ARE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT THE WELLBEING OF SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS?

For workers in Canada through SAWP, there are strict rules imposed by both the workers' home country and the Canadian government for both farmers and workers in order to participate in the program. Workers on the program have the same workplace protections as Canadian workers, including minimum wage, health care, and workplace insurance coverage, and access to Employment Insurance, from the moment they arrive in Canada. Several countries with foreign workers in Canada also have liaisons residing in Canada, who are able to support their citizens while they work in Canada.



## WHAT CHALLENGES DO SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS FACE?

Although temporary foreign workers and their families benefit from work in Canada, it is still difficult to be away from loved ones for an extended period of time. Most workers have internet access on the farms where they live and are able to communicate with friends and family back home regularly – even daily.



Though many resources exist to support temporary foreign workers and ensure they have a positive experience, some may also encounter barriers related to a lack of awareness of how to access these resources, language difficulties, fear of employer reprisal, societal attitudes, lack of transportation and being in rural locations. Employers take steps to ensure that workers have what they need during their time in Canada. For example, farms will arrange regular transportation to town for workers to go shopping and run errands. The industry is also currently working to ensure that workers have access to culturally appropriate resources to understand health and safety information during the pandemic.



## HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many international workers were unable to get to Canada to work for the season. Although farmers tried to hire local workers to replace them, many crops were either not planted at all, or could not be harvested, as in the case of perennial crops like asparagus or strawberries.

**The health and safety of all farm workers, whether international or domestic, is paramount to Canadian farmers, both during normal circumstances and even more so during the pandemic.**

Farmers have worked closely with the government and health officials to take additional steps to protect all agricultural workers against the risk of COVID-19.

Steps have included adjustments to housing, transportation, and work settings to create physical barriers between workers, or appropriate distancing, in addition to increased sanitation and use of personal protective equipment. Workers that were able to come to Canada were subject to strict pre-screening, monitoring and quarantine protocols, similar to those required of all travelers entering Canada.



[The Agenda \(TVO\)  
Feeding Ontario during a Pandemic](#)



[Nature Fresh Farms  
The Hardest Harvest](#)



Temporary foreign workers, much like manufacturing or food processing employees, have been found to be at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to congregate living accommodations and sometimes working environments that require close contact.

Farmers have worked quickly to address issues as they arise to keep workers safe. Outbreaks on some Ontario farms, for example, have been linked to unregulated local recruitment agencies whose contract workers moved from farm to farm, increasing the risk of virus transmission to foreign workers that live on the farm. Ontario fruit and vegetable farmers have called on government and local health authorities to ensure that temporary contract agencies comply with Canadian law and are held to the same ethical and legal standards required when farms hire Canadians or individuals through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

Some Ontario communities came together to **show support and appreciation for the arrival and hard work of temporary foreign workers** by creating care packages, thank you signage, and grocery delivery services.

Efforts continue to fill resource gaps for workers so that they can arrive and safely work on Ontario farms during the 2021 growing season and beyond.

# ACTIVITY 1:

## *Welcome to Canada Service Project*



Primary

### ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

Seasonal agricultural workers arrive in Ontario/Canada beginning in the early spring. When they arrive here from their home country, they may sometimes be far away from towns/cities and do not have access to their own personal vehicles to gather necessary supplies immediately. Teachers will have to contact local farmers in the area who utilize seasonal agricultural workers to gather information regarding the amount of workers, male/female etc.

- Explore the topics of kindness and empathy with the students by asking questions about how these seasonal agricultural workers might feel as they leave home to work in another country.
- For this activity, students can put together “Welcome Baskets” for the seasonal agricultural workers which will provide them with essential supplies while they are getting settled into their new home.
- Students can include letters, artwork, posters etc. to welcome them to their town, toothbrushes, toothpaste, water bottles, hats etc.
- Students can also include activities for seasonal workers to do during their off time including playing cards, basketballs, soccer balls etc.
- Students can gather supplies by hosting a fundraiser, seeking donations from the community etc.
- Optional Extension: Students can participate in a penpal letter exchange program, where they will exchange a series of letters with a seasonal farm worker.

### ONTARIO CURRICULUM LINKS

#### **Social Studies: Strand B: People & Environments**

**Grade 1:** *The Local Community:* 1.1, 2.1, 3.7

**Grade 2:** *Global Communities:* 1.1, 1.3, 3.6, 3.8

**Grade 3:** *Living & Working in Ontario:* 1.1, 1.2, 3.4

#### **Health & Physical Education: Strand A: Social-Emotional Learning Skills**

**Grade 1, 2 & 3:** *Healthy Relationships & Critical and Creative Thinking:* A1.4, A1.6

# ACTIVITY 2:

## Temporary Foreign Workers in Action



Junior/Intermediate

### ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

Temporary foreign workers play an important role in Canada's food system. Without them, many farmers would not be able to produce as large of an abundance of food. Technology has changed how our seasonal agricultural workers perform their jobs which also impacts the environment in various ways.

- For this activity, the classroom teacher will reach out to local farmers that utilize temporary foreign workers to allow students the opportunity to “tour” a farm(s), whether virtually or in person to see all of the different jobs temporary foreign workers do as well as the technology that is available to them.
- Students will be encouraged to talk to them, ask questions, and gain a deeper understanding of the vital role they play in our food system.
- If possible, students can tour numerous different types of farms to see how the jobs vary for the temporary foreign workers.
- Students can also be given the opportunity to explore areas of the world that temporary foreign workers travel from.
- Give students the opportunity to reflect on their farm tour experience by creating a written or multimedia piece to share with the class.
- Optional Extension: Students will design and create a piece of technology or innovation that would help support temporary foreign workers while they are performing their daily tasks.

### ONTARIO CURRICULUM LINKS

#### Social Studies: Strand B: People & Environments

**Grade 4:** *Political & Physical Regions of Canada:* 1.3, 2.1, 2.2

**Grade 5:** *The Role of Government & Responsible Citizenship:* 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 3.8, 3.9

**Grade 6:** *Canada's Interactions with the Global Community:* 1.1, 2.1, 3.1, 3.5

**Grade 7 Science:** *Understanding Life Systems: Interactions in the Environment:* 1.1

**Grade 8 Geography:** *Global Inequalities: Economic Development & Quality of Life:* 1.1, 1.3



# ACTIVITY 3:

## *Debate: Are temporary foreign workers essential to Ontario/Canadian farms?*



Intermediate/Senior

### ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

For this activity, students will have the opportunity to debate amongst their classmates if temporary foreign workers are essential to Ontario/Canadian farms.

- Prior to the formal debate, students will be educated on proper debate etiquette/protocol, reminded to be respectful of their classmates' thoughts/opinions and will also be encouraged to propose ways to “solve” this problem.
- Students will then choose or be assigned their stance on the subject-do they agree or disagree with the above statement “Are temporary foreign workers essential to Ontario/Canadian farms?”, followed by gathering research by using the supporting links provided in this educational document.
- After allowing ample time for students to research this topic, students will engage in a formal debate, followed by a debrief and/or written reflection where they are invited to share what they learned, did any arguments change their thoughts/opinions etc.
- Optional Extension: Students will write an opinion piece on a researched topic related to temporary foreign workers that could be submitted to the local or school newspaper.

### ONTARIO CURRICULUM LINKS

#### **Grade 9 (Academic) Issues in Canadian Geography**

- *Interactions in the Physical Environment*: B1.2
- *Managing Canada’s Resources & Industries*: C3.1
- *Changing Populations*: D2.1, D2.2, D3.1, D3.2
- *Liveable Communities*: E1.1, E1.3

#### **Grade 9 (Academic) English**

- *Oral Communication - Speaking to Communicate*: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6

#### **Grade 9 Food & Nutrition**

- *Local & Global Foods*: D1.1, D1.2

#### **Grade 10 (Academic) English**

- *Oral Communication - Speaking to Communicate*: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6

# ACTIVITY 3: continued...

## *Debate: Are temporary foreign workers essential to Ontario/Canadian farms?*

### ONTARIO CURRICULUM LINKS

#### Grade 11 (University) English

- Language
  - Developing Vocabulary and Knowledge of Language Structures and Conventions
  - Developing Listening and Speaking Skills

#### Grade 11 (University) Food & Culture

- *Culture, Foods & Food Practices*: B1.2, B1.3, B3.2

#### Grade 11 Dynamics of Human Relationships

- *Rights & Responsibilities*: D1.1, D1.2, D1.3, D1.4, D2.1, D2.2, D2.3
- *Interpersonal Skills*: E4.1, E4.2, E4.3

#### Grade 12 (University) English

- Language
  - Developing Vocabulary and Knowledge of Language Structures and Conventions
  - Developing Listening and Speaking Skills

#### Grade 12 Nutrition & Health

- *Local & Global Issues*: D1.4, D2.1, D2.2, D2.3, D2.4, D3.4

#### Grade 12 Challenge and Change in Society

- *Research and Inquiry Skills*: A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A2.1, A2.2, A2.3, A3.1, A3.2, A3.3, A3.4, A3.5, A4.1, A4.2, A4.3, A4.4
- *Social Change*: B2.2, B2.3, B2.4, B2.5, B2.6, B3.1, B3.2, B3.3
- *Global Social Challenges*: D1.1, D1.2, D1.4, D2.1, D2.3, D3.2

#### Grade 12 World Issues: A Geographic Analysis

- *Geographic Inquiry*: A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A1.4, A1.5, A1.6, A1.7, A1.8, A1.9, A2.1, A2.2, A2.3, A2.4
- *Interactions and Interdependence: Globalization*: D1.1, D2.2

*Changing Societies*: E2.1, E2.2, E3.4

# MORE INFORMATION



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Employment and Social Development Canada](#) - Hire a temporary worker through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program: Overview

[Canadian Agriculture Human Resource Council](#) - A national, non-profit organization focused on addressing human resource issues facing agricultural businesses across Canada. It contains a library of resources to help support farmers and temporary foreign workers.

[Government of Canada](#) - Explore the rights of temporary foreign workers and the responsibilities of the employer as outlined by the government of Canada.

[The Real Dirt on Farming](#) - Straight answers on food security, climate change, animal welfare, and much more

[Agriculture in the Classroom Canada](#) - The national voice for agriculture education in Canada



For more information and access to free agriculture and food education programs, visit [www.AgScape.ca](http://www.AgScape.ca)



For more information about food and farming in Ontario, visit [www.FarmFoodCareON.org](http://www.FarmFoodCareON.org)