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**GROWN LOCALLY,  
HARVESTED GLOBALLY:  
THE ROLE OF TEMPORARY  
FOREIGN WORKERS IN  
CANADIAN AGRICULTURE**

Robert Falconer

# GROWN LOCALLY, HARVESTED GLOBALLY: THE ROLE OF TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN CANADIAN AGRICULTURE\*

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## SUMMARY

Canadians produce a lot of food, but harvesting that food has increasingly meant relying on a growing force of temporary foreign workers (TFWs). In 2020, however, border restrictions imposed by Canadian governments to control the spread of the novel coronavirus, and perhaps the reluctance of TFWs to travel to Canada during the pandemic, have significantly impeded the use of TFWs in Canada's food-production system. That has revealed the vulnerabilities of the Canadian food supply chain to globally disruptive events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the risk to a system that has, historically, provided Canadians with a stable, affordable supply of food for their local grocery stores.

By the end of 2019, Canada had seen a record number of TFWs employed in the agriculture sector, as the number of Canadian citizens and permanent residents employed in the industry has remained relatively stagnant and even declined. However, travel restrictions imposed by Canadian governments due to the COVID-19 pandemic have coincided with a significant reduction in TFWs working in Canada in 2020. In total, there has been a 14-per-cent drop in the arrival of TFWs working in Canadian agriculture this year. Producers in the secondary agricultural sector, such as meat-processing and seafood-processing facilities, had been experiencing the fastest growth in the use of TFWs until now, and have seen the greatest relative reduction in TFW arrivals in comparison to 2019. Farms, which are primary producers, have experienced the largest reduction in TFW arrivals in absolute terms.

Although the economic effects of the pandemic-related lockdown have put many Canadians out of work, replacing TFWs with Canadian workers may not be practicable. Producers may not be able to hire Canadians willing to work on farms, ranches or in food-processing plants in sufficient numbers to make up for the shortfall in TFWs. When the government of New Brunswick completely banned the entry of TFWs due to the pandemic, it did not result in a significant increase in local hiring. In addition, TFWs often come with experience gained from previous years working in Canada's food sector; training Canadians to replace them requires

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time and resources that can jeopardize the precious time that producers have to complete seasonal seeding, harvesting, and fishing activities.

Policy-makers will need to consider ways to ensure that TFWs, which have become critical to Canada's food supply chain, are able to come to Canada safely and work in safe environments, in the face of the pandemic health risk. This year will already be a more difficult one for producers, and future years could face similar challenges. Canadians have come to rely on the use of TFWs to ensure fully stocked grocery stores carrying affordable food products. If producers are increasingly unable to source international labour to produce that food, Canada's reliable and affordable food supply may be at risk.

# CULTIVÉ LOCALEMENT, RÉCOLTÉ À L'ÉCHELLE MONDIALE : LE RÔLE DES TRAVAILLEURS ÉTRANGERS TEMPORAIRES DANS L'AGRICULTURE CANADIENNE\*

Robert Falconer

## RÉSUMÉ

Le Canada produit beaucoup de nourriture, mais pour la récolte, il faut de plus en plus compter sur la main-d'œuvre des travailleurs étrangers temporaires (TET). En 2020, cependant, les restrictions frontalières imposées par les gouvernements pour contrôler la propagation du nouveau coronavirus, et peut-être aussi la réticence des TET à se rendre au Canada pendant la pandémie, ont considérablement entravé l'apport des TET dans le système de production alimentaire canadien. Cela dévoile les faiblesses de la chaîne d'approvisionnement alimentaire face à des événements perturbateurs d'ordre mondial, comme la pandémie de COVID-19. Cela fait aussi voir le risque auquel s'expose le système qui, en temps normal, fournit un approvisionnement alimentaire stable et abordable dans les épiceries locales.

À la fin de 2019, le Canada accueillait un nombre record de TET dans le secteur agricole, alors que le nombre de citoyens canadiens et de résidents permanents employés dans cette industrie demeurait relativement stable, voire même en baisse. Quoi qu'il en soit, les restrictions de voyage imposées par les gouvernements en raison de la pandémie de COVID-19 coïncident avec une réduction importante du nombre de TET au Canada, en 2020. Globalement, ce nombre accusait une baisse de 14 % en 2020. C'est le secteur agricole secondaire, comme la transformation de la viande et des fruits de mer, qui a connu la plus forte croissance de TET jusqu'à présent. C'est aussi dans ce secteur qu'on connaît la plus importante baisse relative de TET, par rapport à 2019. Les fermes, qui forment le secteur de production primaire, ont connu la plus forte baisse de TET, en chiffres absolus.

Bien que les effets économiques du confinement aient mis de nombreux Canadiens au chômage, le remplacement des TET par des travailleurs canadiens n'est peut-être pas faisable. Les producteurs ne sont peut-être pas en mesure d'embaucher suffisamment de Canadiens dans les fermes, ranchs ou usines de transformation alimentaire pour compenser le manque de TET. Après l'interdiction complète d'entrée des TET au Nouveau-Brunswick, en raison de la pandémie, il n'y a pas

\* Cette recherche a été soutenue financièrement en partie par le gouvernement du Canada via Diversification de l'économie de l'Ouest Canada.

eu augmentation significative de l'embauche locale. De plus, les TET possèdent souvent une expérience acquise dans le secteur alimentaire canadien. Former des Canadiens pour les remplacer nécessite du temps et des ressources, et cela peut compromettre les activités saisonnières d'ensemencement, de récolte et de pêche.

Les décideurs devront envisager des moyens d'assurer que les TET, qui sont devenus essentiels à la chaîne d'approvisionnement alimentaire du Canada, puissent venir au Canada en toute sécurité et travailler dans des environnements sûrs, dans le contexte de la pandémie. Cette année sera déjà plus difficile pour les producteurs et on pourrait voir des défis similaires dans les années à venir. Les Canadiens comptent sur le travail des TET pour l'approvisionnement alimentaire dans les épiceries. Si les producteurs sont de moins en moins capables de trouver de la main-d'œuvre internationale pour la production, cela pourrait menacer l'approvisionnement fiable et abordable au Canada.

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As Canada and the world grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, important questions have arisen regarding Canada's food supply chain. In a two-part series, we outline the role of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in the Canadian agriculture sector, the risks they face in light of COVID-19, and how policy-makers might address these risks and secure Canada's food supply chain. The increasing number of TFWs in the agricultural sector raises important questions during a time of limited international travel and high levels of unemployment in Canada.

In this communiqué, we provide a sector-by-sector overview of TFWs working in the agricultural and transportation sectors of each province. These sectors include primary agricultural and agri-food activities, such as fishing and farming, and secondary agricultural activities, such as the processing and packaging of meat, seafood and other food items. We also present data on the recent drop in arrivals by TFWs in total terms and by individual sector. In a subsequent paper, we will explore some policy options for securing Canada's agricultural sector, while improving labour conditions and outcomes for migrant workers.

## **THE GROWING PARTICIPATION OF TFWS IN AGRICULTURE**

The end of 2019 marked a new record for the number of TFWs working in Canadian agriculture. Approximately 64,000 foreign workers arrived to work in a variety of different agricultural industries, including seafood-packing plants in the Maritimes, orchards in British Columbia, and cattle ranches on the Prairies. The increasing involvement of TFWs in the agricultural sector raises important questions during a time of limited international travel and domestic uncertainty around unemployment. The number of Canadian citizens and permanent residents working in agriculture has remained relatively stagnant, with even a slight decline in recent years (Statistics Canada 2020), while the number of TFWs working in agricultural production, processing, or transportation rose by 52 per cent between 2015 and 2019 alone.<sup>1</sup>

As shown in Table 1, while the majority of employees working in primary agriculture are Canadian citizens or permanent residents, the use of TFWs is increasingly important, especially within plant-based agriculture. With the exception of a few sectors, the number of TFWs working in Canadian primary agriculture increased, for a cumulative increase of 13 per cent between 2016 and 2018. By 2018, almost one in five workers in primary agriculture came from abroad, reaching 48 per cent in fruit and tree-nut farming, but were as low as two per cent in oilseed and grain farming.

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<sup>1</sup>

Author's calculations; (IRCC 2020).

**TABLE 1: THE INCREASE IN TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN PRIMARY AGRICULTURE, 2016-18**

Primary Agriculture Sector	2016 (TFWs)	2018 (TFWs)	2016 (Local)	2018 (Local)	2016 Ratio	2018 Ratio	TFW % Change
Cattle and ranch farming	1,179	1,548	43,838	44,896	3%	3%	31%
Hog and pig farming	625	496	9,898	10,244	6%	5%	-21%
Poultry and egg production	365	446	14,416	15,531	2%	3%	22%
Other animal production	806	784	9,168	10,250	8%	7%	-3%
Oilseed and grain farming	1,395	1,089	42,059	44,164	3%	2%	-22%
Vegetable and melon farming	12,707	13,210	22,928	20,606	36%	39%	4%
Fruit and tree-nut farming	12,609	14,848	17,292	16,143	42%	48%	18%
Greenhouse, nursery and floriculture	15,426	18,389	44,015	38,492	26%	32%	19%
Other crop farming	3,473	3,924	13,598	13,719	20%	22%	13%
<b>Total animal production</b>	<b>2,975</b>	<b>3,274</b>	<b>77,320</b>	<b>80,921</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Total plant production</b>	<b>45,610</b>	<b>51,460</b>	<b>139,892</b>	<b>133,124</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Total production</b>	<b>48,585</b>	<b>54,734</b>	<b>217,212</b>	<b>214,045</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>13%</b>

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The government of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) allows employers in agriculture and other sectors to hire workers from abroad, provided they cannot find a Canadian citizen or permanent resident to fill a particular job opening (IRCC 2015). Employers must prove to Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) that they have tried to hire locally, and that there is a need for the foreign worker to fill a labour shortage (Burt and Meyer-Robinson 2016). Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (IRCC 2020) is specific to primary agriculture and Canada has signed a number of bilateral agreements with countries in the Caribbean and Latin America to facilitate the hiring of workers for seasonal agriculture. Employers must provide these workers with the same wages and benefits they would provide to Canadians, and may provide them on-site lodging (ibid.).

## THE GEOGRAPHIC ORIGINS OF TFWs IN AGRICULTURE

Figures 1 and 2 show the diverse geographic origins of TFWs that come to work in the primary agriculture sector. Figure 1 shows their origins on a global basis, with countries in Central America and the Caribbean aggregated together in regions. Figure 2 shows the numbers of TFWs from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America. As shown in the figures, the vast majority of TFWs working in Canadian primary agriculture are from Mexico (52 per cent), the Caribbean (22 per cent) and Central America (19 per cent).

FIGURE 1: GEOGRAPHIC ORIGINS OF TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS, CUMULATIVE FROM 2016-18

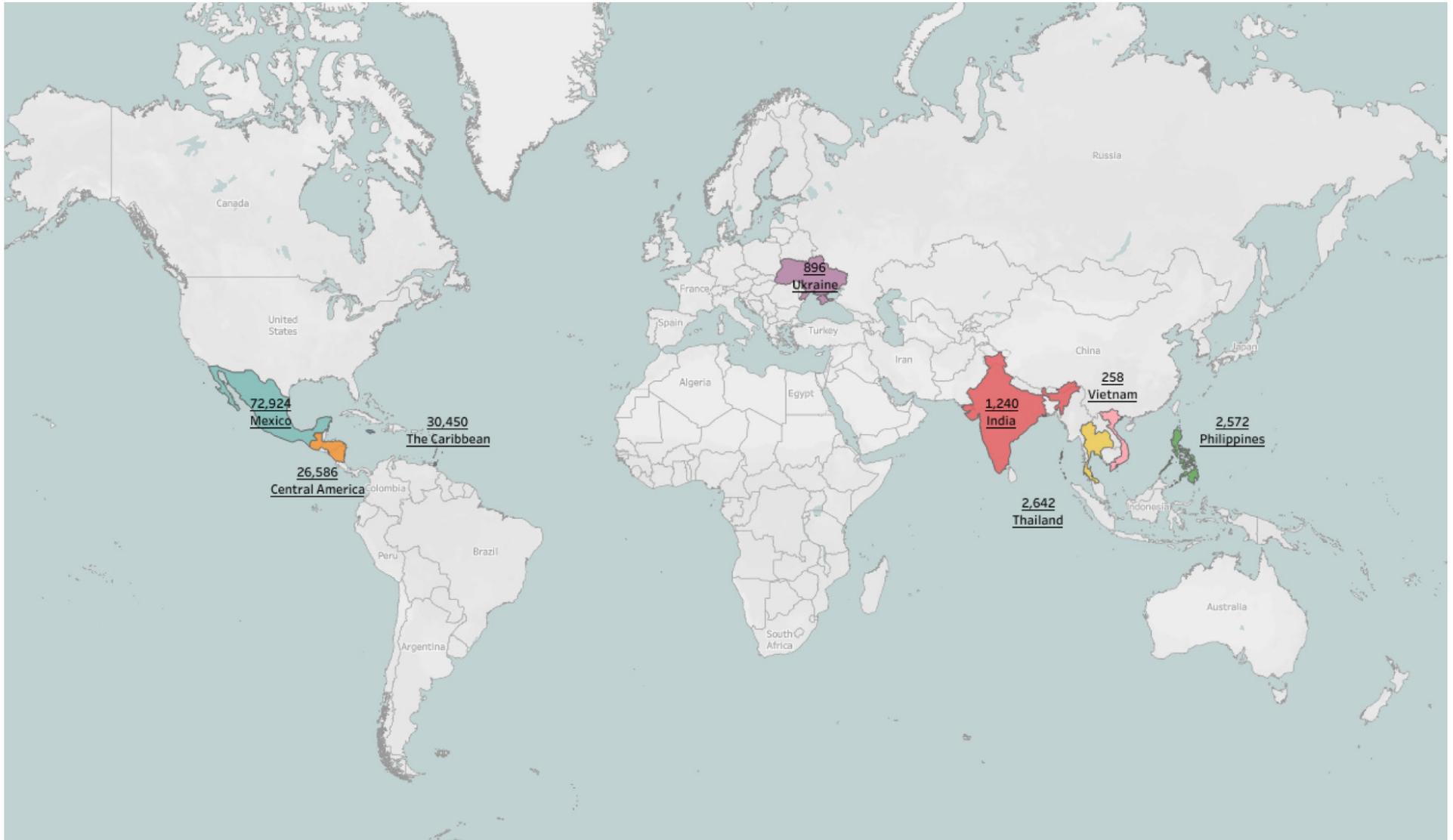
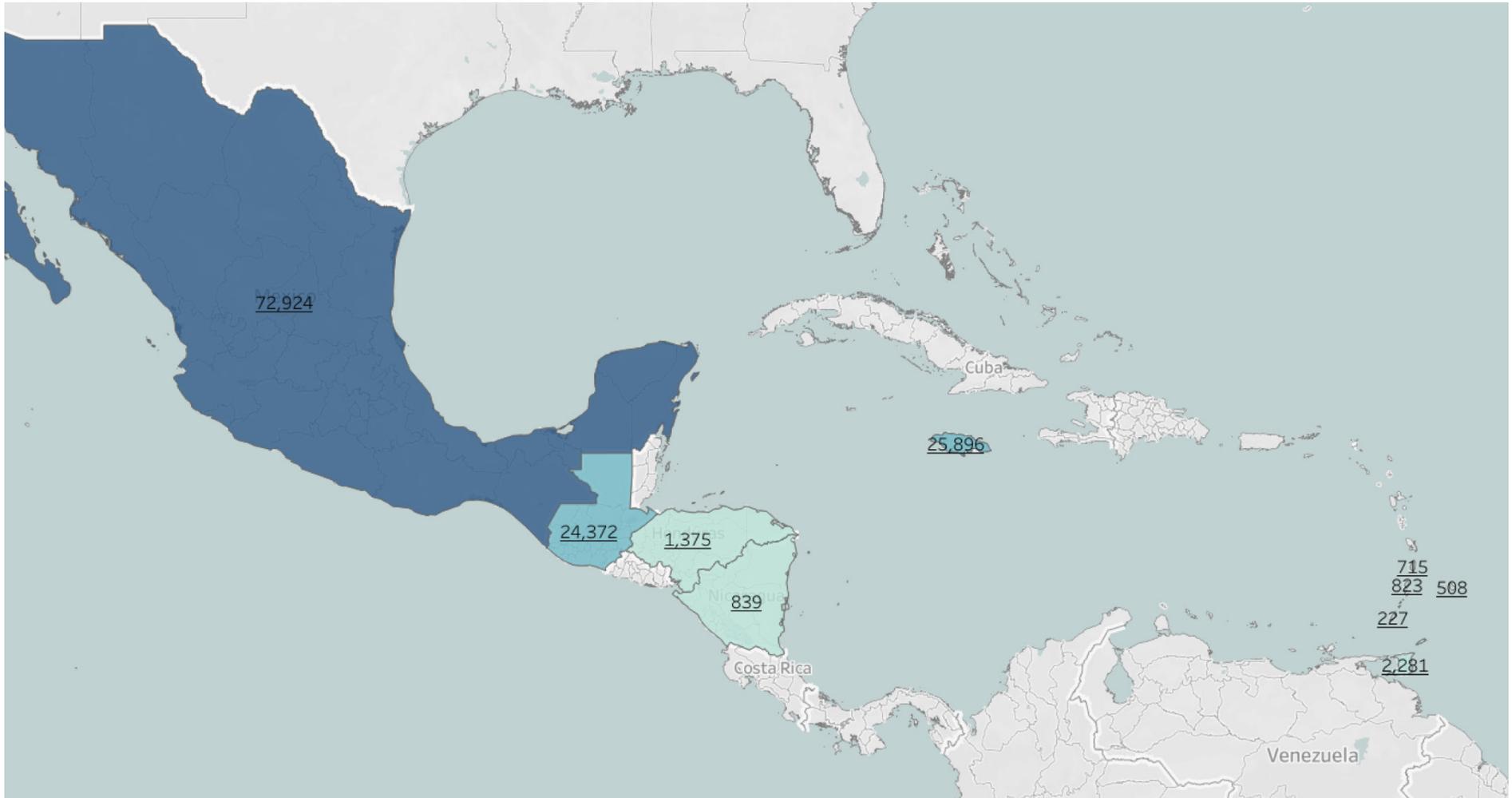


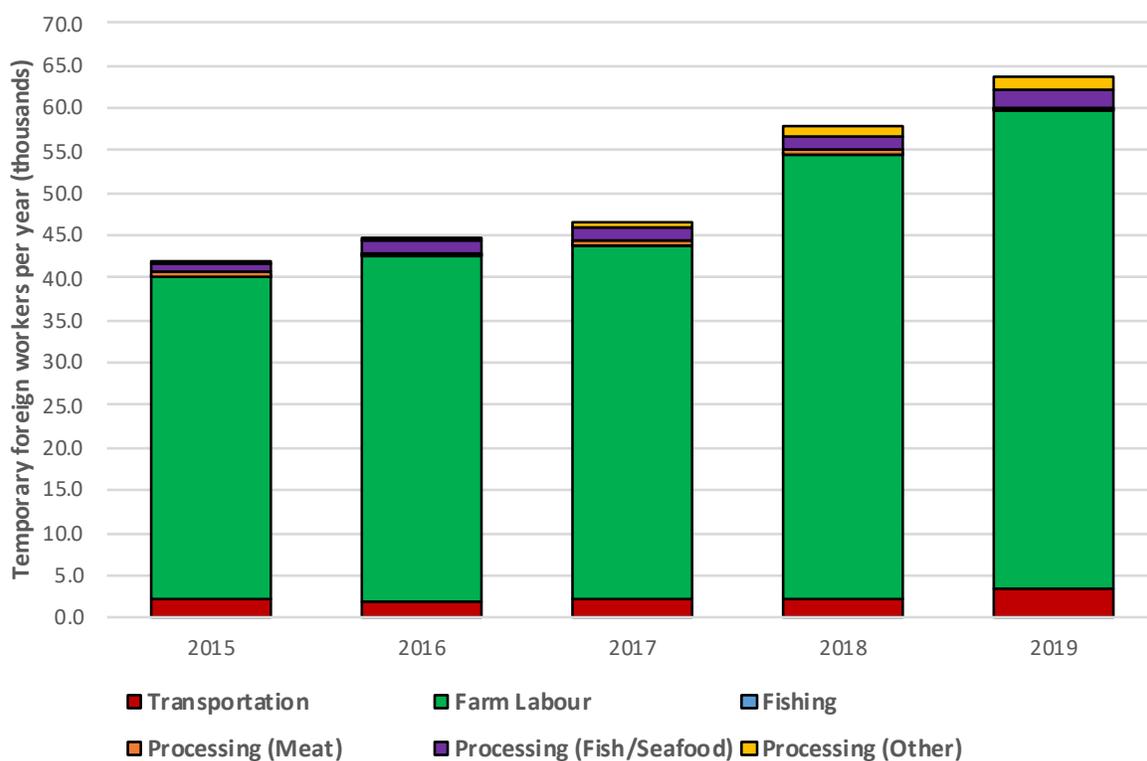
FIGURE 2: GEOGRAPHIC ORIGINS OF TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS, WESTERN HEMISPHERE, CUMULATIVE FROM 2016-18



## TFWS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SETTINGS

The previous sections focused on TFWs working in primary agricultural settings, that is, those focused directly in cultivating, tending and harvesting plant-based agriculture and meat products. In the following section, we also include those labouring in food processing, including meat, poultry and seafood-processing plants. We also include those working in transporting agricultural commodities by truck, sea and other forms of transportation. All of these workers play some role in growing, collecting, preparing and delivering food from farms, ranches and the sea to grocery stores across Canada and for export overseas. The data for this section are drawn from monthly reports on temporary residents working in particular National Occupational Classification codes. Figure 3 shows the number of workers in transportation and agricultural production by industry. Primary agriculture, which includes the planting, gathering and harvesting of food, is differentiated from processing, which includes the preparation and packaging of food.

**FIGURE 3: TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN SUPPLY CHAIN AND AGRICULTURE BY INDUSTRY, 2015-19.**



As of 2019, there were 63,830 TFWs working across Canada on farms, in processing plants and in transportation. As indicated by the size of the green bars in Figure 3, the vast majority of TFWs working in agriculture are farm labourers, approaching 88 per cent in 2019. This was followed by food processing, representing seven per cent of workers, and transportation, with five per cent

of workers. While the vast majority of TFWs in agriculture remain employed as farm labourers, the rapid increase of TFWs being employed in food-processing operations is significant. Within the past five years, the employment of TFWs in the preparation and packaging of food has increased by 140 per cent, from 1,780 TFWs working in Canadian agricultural processing in 2015 to 4,260 in 2019.

Table 2 shows the distribution of workers by sector and province for 2019, while Table 3 provides these in percentage terms. Across Canada, most TFWs were concentrated in Ontario (38.9 per cent) and Quebec (26.5 per cent), followed by B.C. (20.3 per cent), Alberta (4.9 per cent, and Nova Scotia (3.0 per cent). When broken down by industry, however, the distribution of TFWs working in different types of agriculture varies significantly across Canada. Figure 4 shows the distribution of TFWs in different industries by province.

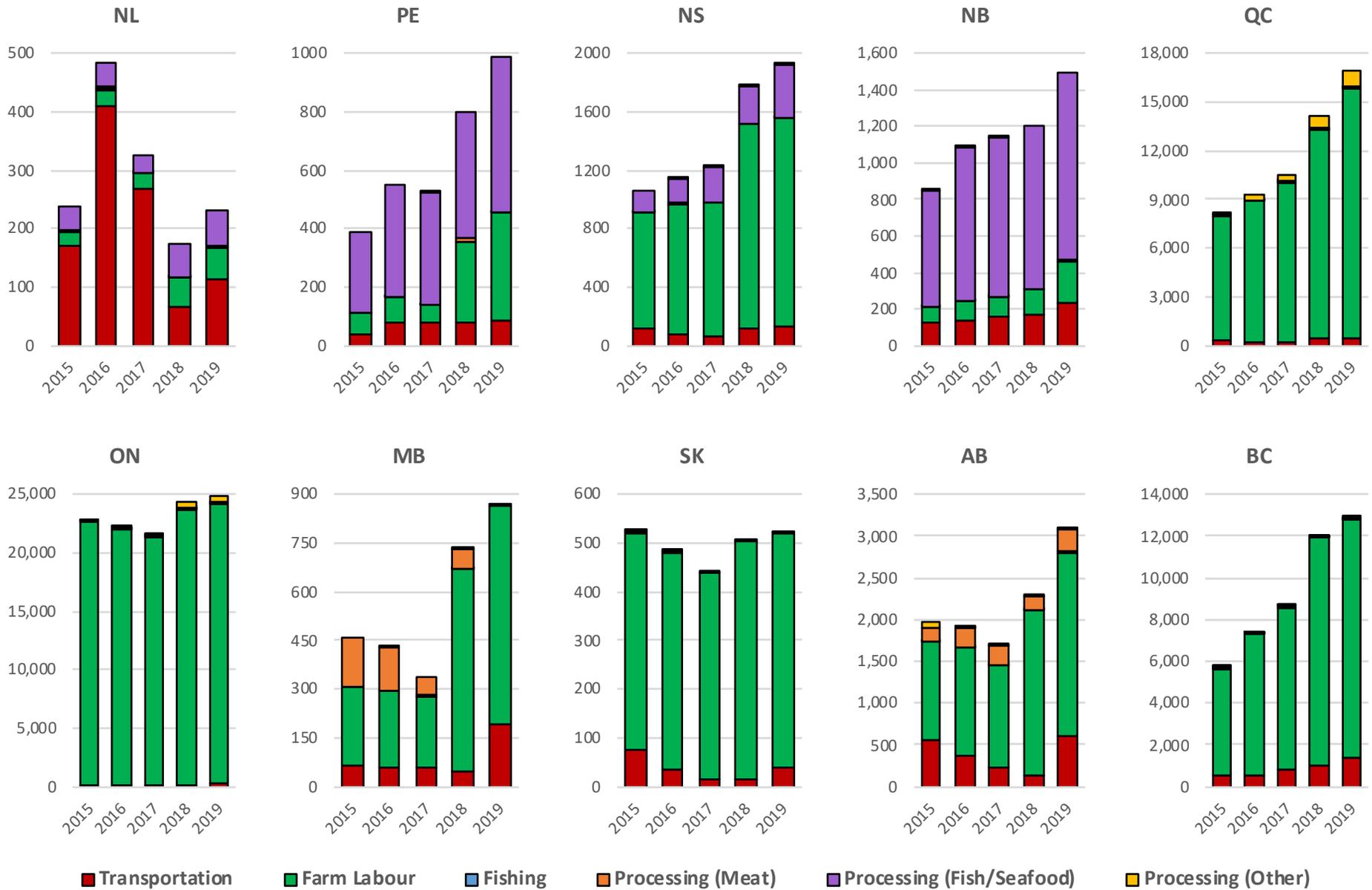
**TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS ACROSS SECTORS AND PROVINCES, 2019**

Province/ Industry	Transportation	Farm Labour	Fishing	Processing (Meat)	Processing (Seafood)	Processing (Other)	Total
NL	115	55	0	0	60	0	230
PE	85	370	0	0	535	0	990
NS	125	1,435	0	0	355	5	1,920
NB	230	235	0	10	1,020	0	1,495
QC	475	15,340	0	50	120	945	16,935
ON	210	23,920	0	155	0	555	24,845
MB	195	670	0	0	0	0	865
SK	35	485	0	0	0	0	520
AB	610	2,195	0	270	0	15	3,095
BC	1,375	11,395	5	50	20	80	12,930
<b>Canada</b>	<b>3,450</b>	<b>56,110</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>540</b>	<b>2,100</b>	<b>1,610</b>	<b>63,830</b>

**TABLE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS ACROSS SECTORS AND PROVINCES, PERCENTAGE, 2019**

Province/ Industry	Transportation	Farm Labour	Fishing	Processing (Meat)	Processing (Seafood)	Processing (Other)	Total
NL	3.3	0.1	--	0.2	2.8	0.0	0.4
PE	2.4	0.7	--	0.2	25.3	0.0	1.6
NS	3.6	2.6	--	0.2	16.8	0.3	3.0
NB	6.6	0.4	--	1.9	48.3	0.0	2.3
QC	13.7	27.3	--	9.3	5.7	58.9	26.5
ON	6.1	42.6	--	28.8	0.0	34.6	38.9
MB	5.6	1.2	--	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.4
SK	1.1	0.9	--	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.8
AB	17.7	3.9	--	50.1	0.0	1.1	4.9
BC	39.8	20.3	100.0	9.3	1.0	5.0	20.3

**FIGURE 4: TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN TRANSPORTATION AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION BY INDUSTRY AND PROVINCE, 2015-19**



## GROWTH TRENDS BY SECTOR, AND THE COVID-19 DROP

In reviewing the above figures, several trends stand out. First, the participation of TFWs is primarily concentrated in general farm labour. Almost nine out of every 10 TFWs involved with agriculture in Canada works on a farm as a general labourer, specifically at harvest time, or as a plant or animal-based specialist. There is, however, a rising trend in TFWs working in secondary agriculture in Canada. Secondary agriculture involves the processing of meat, poultry, seafood, dairy, or other foodstuffs in packinghouses and processing plants. In 2019 there were approximately 4,260 TFWs processing meat, fish and other commodities, compared to 1,780 in 2015. The seafood-processing industry, which shows the fastest growing employment rate for TFWs, is concentrated primarily in the Atlantic provinces, while meat processing dominates in Alberta. Plants processing dairy, grains, fruits, vegetables and other goods are rapidly expanding their use of TFWs in Quebec and Ontario.

The growing use of TFWs in processing food is especially relevant in light of the spread of COVID-19 among plant workers in places such as Brooks and High River, Alta. (Bragg 2020). TFWs may be particularly vulnerable to pandemics, as many reside with roommates to save costs or live in cramped quarters at their worksite (Campbell 2020; *ibid.*). COVID-19 has reduced the number of TFWs arriving in Canada. Some TFWs may be choosing to remain home, while others may be formally restricted from leaving their home countries (CBC News 2020).

Figures 5 and 6 shows the impact of COVID-19 on the arrival of TFWs working in Canadian agriculture. The arrival of TFWs to Canada tends to spike through the spring and early summer, and drop through the late fall and winter periods. In March and April, for example, arrivals are approximately 40-per-cent and 150-per-cent higher in comparison to the average arrivals in other months during the year.<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with early planting and calving activities that signal the beginning of the agricultural season, as well as the onset of the spring lobster season (DFO 2020). By comparison, in October and November, the number of arrivals fall by 70 per cent in comparison to other months, consistent with the end of harvest and fishing activities, and the return of TFWs to their home countries upon the expiration of their seasonal work permits (IRCC 2020).<sup>3</sup> For 2020, TFW arrivals in March dropped by 43 per cent in comparison to 2019. While the number arrivals

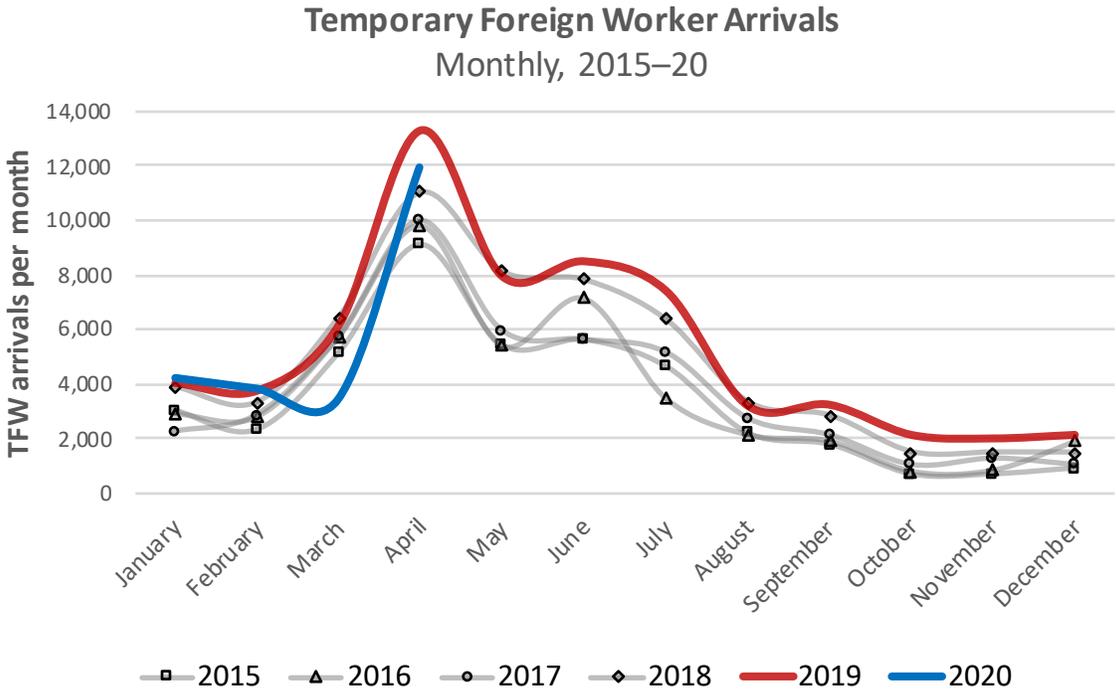
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<sup>2</sup> Author's calculations; Calculated from IRCC Dataset 360024f2-17e9-4558-bfc1-3616485d65b9 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> TFWs working under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program receive a work permit that authorizes them to live and work in Canada for a maximum of eight months, between January 1 and December 15 (IRCC 2020). Employers must apply to renew this seasonal work permit each year. Other TFWs working in the agricultural sector may receive work permits for longer periods of time, with the opportunity to extend their work permit with the approval of their employer and the federal government. TFWs under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program tend to have low transition rates to permanent residency (less than three per cent), but high renewal rates, meaning they return for another six-to-eight-month season year (45 per cent renewed after three years, 39 per cent after five years, and 23 per cent after 10 years) (Statistics Canada 2017; Statistics Canada 2018). TFWs in other programs tend to have higher transition rates (12 to 16 per cent), but much lower renewal rates, meaning they or their employer choose not to renew their permits over time (13 per cent renewed after three years, six per cent after five years, and 0.8 per cent after 10 years).

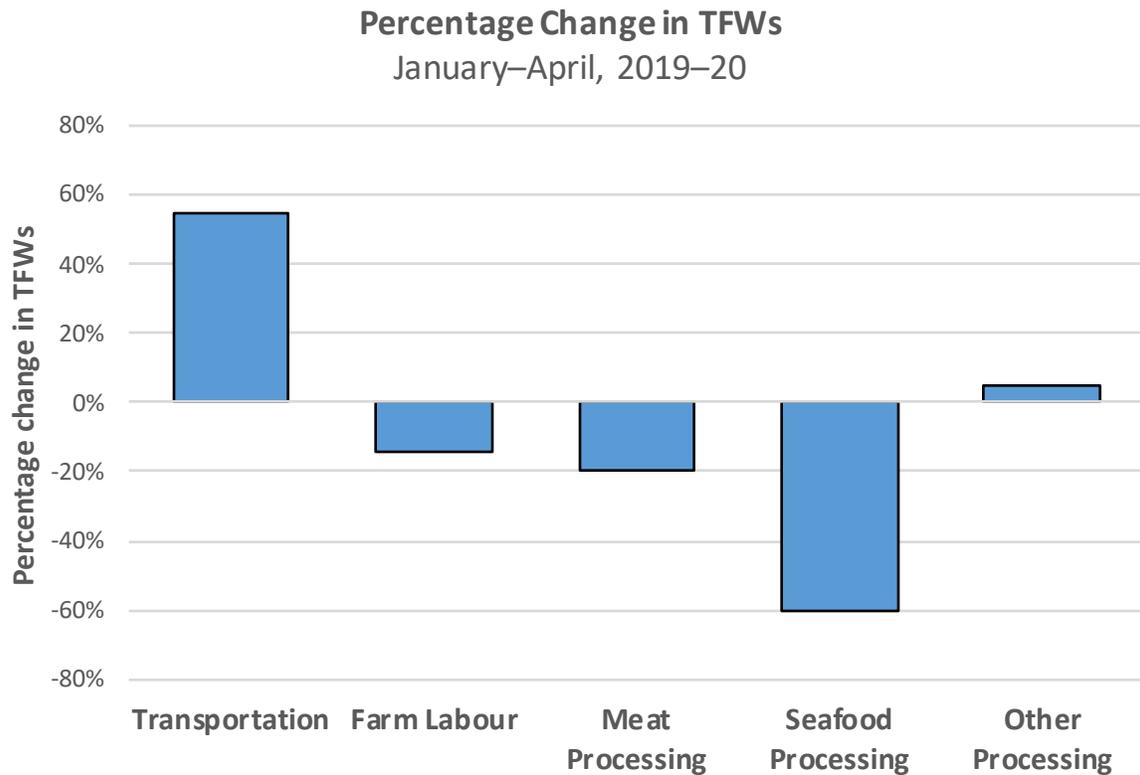
rebounded in April, they were still 10-per-cent below April 2019 levels. The result is a 14-per-cent drop in arrivals during the first months of 2020, representing a shortfall of approximately 3,800 workers.

**FIGURE 5: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ARRIVING TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS**



The shortfall in workers is particularly evident among meat and seafood packers, located primarily in Alberta and the Maritimes, with meat-processing plants experiencing a decline of approximately 20 per cent and seafood plants by 60 per cent. Farmers, as well, are expected to face significant labour shortages, experiencing a drop of approximately 14 per cent below 2019 levels. By contrast, arrivals within the transportation sector increased by 55 per cent in comparison to 2019. This may be a reflection of an early decision by the federal government to designate employees in the transportation sector as essential workers, with the ability to travel internationally (IRCC 2020).

FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN ARRIVING TFWs



The shortfall described above may be even greater when taking into consideration plans made by producers in 2019 to expand output in the coming season. Purchases around livestock, seed and expanded facilities are likely to have been made with the expectation of increased hiring. While some might see this as an opportunity to focus hiring efforts on unemployed Canadians, producers may not be able to hire local workers in sufficient numbers. A decision by the government of New Brunswick to ban the entry of TFWs during the pandemic did not result in a significant increase in local hiring (Brown 2020). In addition, producers must also devote time and resources to training new domestic workers, while many TFWs come with the experience of previous seasons. The need to train new workers, in combination with a required 14-day quarantine period for incoming TFWs, means that producers face not only a shortage of workers, but significant delays as planting, calving, and other critical aspects of the agricultural season enter full swing (IRCC 2020).

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has revealed the vulnerabilities of TFWs to the pandemic, as well as the potential risk to the labour supply of Canada’s agricultural sector. In this paper, we have outlined the increasing reliance on TFWs by Canadian primary and secondary producers in agriculture, as well as supply-chain logistics. This

reliance is concentrated on Canadian farms, which host the vast majority of TFWs. Secondary agricultural production, however, has demonstrated the fastest-growing employment of TFWs across other sectors in agriculture. This is particularly true among seafood-processing plants in the Atlantic provinces and meat-packing plants in Alberta. These secondary agricultural-production facilities have experienced the greatest reduction in TFW arrivals relative to arrivals in 2019, while farms have experienced the greatest loss in absolute terms. In total, Canada has experienced a shortfall of at least 3,800 foreign workers in comparison to 2019, a drop of approximately 14 per cent, as the sector shifts into full swing.

Federal and provincial governments may wish to consider steps to secure the safety of TFWs as one way to address concerns regarding our food supply chain. In our second paper, we provide specific recommendations with regards to the safety of TFWs and the security of the Canadian food supply chain. As it stands, the decline in available workers is likely to make the 2020 agricultural season a more difficult one for producers. Policy-makers must understand the role of international labour in order to reduce the short- and long-term risks to Canadian agricultural production, thereby ensuring that harvests go on being planted, picked and processed, keeping our grocery stores stocked and Canadians enjoying reasonable prices for what they eat.

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### **About the Author**

**Robert Falconer** is a researcher with The School of Public Policy, and is a Master of Public Policy. His current research examines immigrant and refugee policy, and includes issues such as asylum system reform, refugee resettlement, and retention of immigrants in different Canadian cities and towns.

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