



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

THE
SCHOOL
OF
PUBLIC
POLICY

SPP Briefing Paper
Volume 13:21
August 2020

THE SIMPSON CENTRE
FOR AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD
INNOVATION AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

**FAMILY FARMERS TO
FOREIGN FIELDHANDS:
CONSOLIDATION OF
CANADIAN AGRICULTURE
AND THE TEMPORARY
FOREIGN WORKER
PROGRAM**

Robert Falconer

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SUMMARY

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have made it harder for temporary foreign workers (TFWs) to travel to Canada to work in food production, as they normally would, at the same time that there are large numbers of unemployed Canadians due to the economic lockdown.

Some people, including policy-makers, might be tempted into believing that perhaps the two problems can solve each other, by deploying Canadian workers to the farms, ranches and food-processing plants to fill the jobs that would normally go to TFWs. History suggests that this is fanciful thinking and that any attempt to manage our food supply system without a heavy reliance on foreign workers could easily result in higher food prices and poorer food choices for Canadian consumers at the supermarket.

It's true that there was once a time when food production was mostly managed by domestic workers, however that was when most of these workers were farm families, relying on unpaid family labour to manage smaller farms. Only a small portion of domestic workers were paid employees, aiding farmers for only short periods of time. In the postwar period, Canadian farms underwent a dramatic consolidation, creating significantly fewer farms of substantially larger size that require outside labour to manage them. For decades, food producers have tried to utilize more domestic labour through various means, including higher wages. However, Canadian workers have, for various reasons, largely been reluctant to work on farms or in other parts of the food-processing system and food producers have been forced instead to resort to a combination of technological solutions and an imported, temporary labour force.

Any government trying to shut down the TFW program and replace the labour pool it provides with domestic workers could find little uptake among Canadians, resulting in labour shortages. With producers unable to rapidly or completely

substitute missing workers with mechanization, the result could be higher prices for domestically produced food, reduced Canadian food exports and a greater reliance on imports for our food supply.

A more sensible approach, to better assure the security of Canada's food supply chain and promote economic growth, would be for governments to enact policies that help ameliorate the pandemic-related challenges to the foreign supply of labour. This could include promoting better health and safety regulations through programs, subsidies and enforcement. It could also include measures that provide temporary workers with greater flexibility in case of illness. It might also include additional incentives to attract more TFWs to come and work in our food sector. The COVID-19 pandemic does not change the reality that the security and affordability of Canada's food supply system relies on producers having greater access to imported labour, not less.

In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, questions regarding the participation of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in the Canadian workforce are reasonable. With high levels of unemployment and borders closed to most international traffic due to public health concerns, the Canadian public, policy-makers, and even employers may question the need to employ workers from abroad (Statistics Canada 2020; CBSA 2020). In addition to concerns over the health and employment of Canadians, the spread of COVID-19 among migrant workers has raised alarm over the security of both our food supply chain and the safety of workers (Rodriguez 2020; Yasmeen, Alexander, and Paskal 2020). These concerns have prompted policy-makers at the federal level to study the issue in greater detail, and calls from advocates for expanded worker rights and protections (Migrant Rights 2020; HUMA 2020).

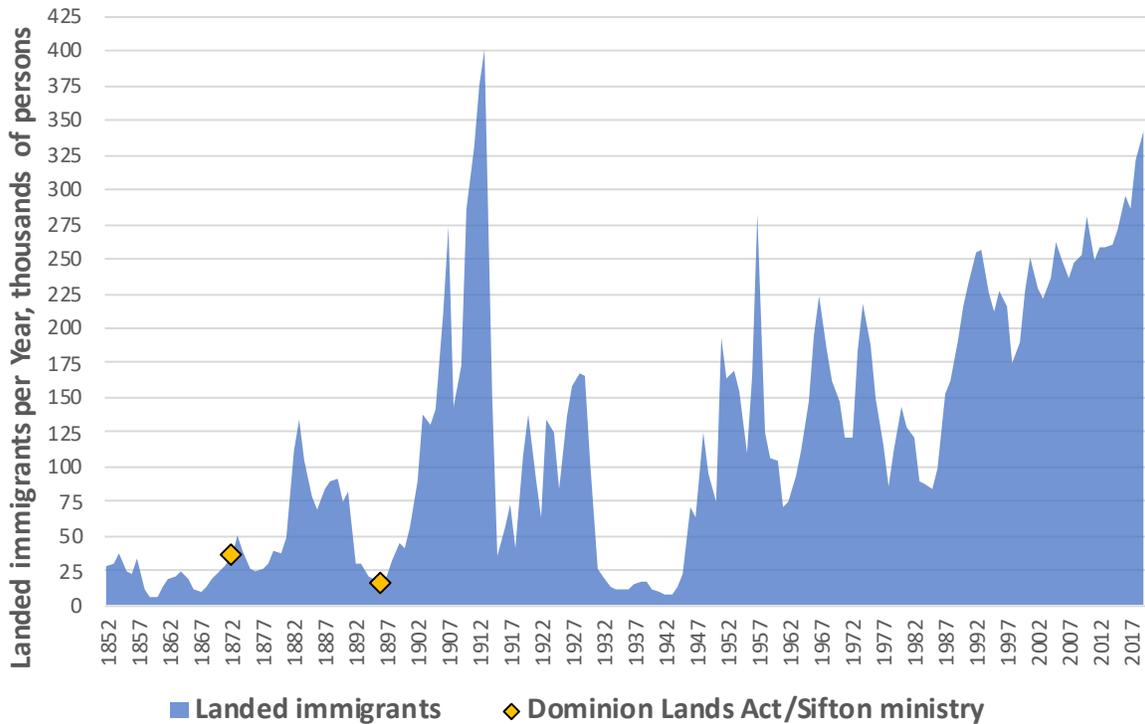
In this paper, we provide answers to some of the above concerns. We begin by outlining the necessary role of foreign workers in Canadian agriculture. Despite the sometimes common notion that TFWs displace domestic workers, we present data that provide a more plausible history of the program. We demonstrate that, following the Second World War, Canadian agriculture underwent significant consolidation and a steep drop in the number of smallholder farms and unpaid family members working on them. As average farm sizes increased and the unpaid labour force fell, producers responded with efforts to mechanize their outfits and offer higher wages for paid employees. Despite efforts to attract local workers, the number of domestic labourers in food production has fluctuated between stagnation and marginal decline. The participation of foreign workers in Canadian food production may have little to do with the displacement of domestic workers in comparison to the consolidation of agriculture and the exit of own-account workers and unpaid family members from the sector, and their substitution with capital investment and expansion of the labour pool beyond the border.

This narrative of industrial transformation rather than displacement should inform the decisions of policy-makers. Governments desiring to shutter the TFW program and replace the labour pool it provides with domestic workers may find little uptake among Canadians, and instead may end up replacing foreign workers with a shortage of workers. Producers may not be able to rapidly substitute towards further mechanization of food production, potentially resulting in higher prices at grocery stores, a reduction in exports, and greater reliance on imported food. We instead provide several suggestions that the federal and provincial governments may wish to consider that would contribute to protecting the lives and supply of foreign workers, and thereby securing the Canadian agricultural sector.

THE WHEAT BOOM ERA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CANADIAN AGRICULTURE

Modern Canadian agriculture has its beginnings in the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 and later, the ministry of Sir Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior in the government of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier. The Act, Canada’s answer to the American Homestead Acts, provided for the “immigration and settlement” of the Canadian Prairies, with a focus on agricultural development (Gagnon, n.d.). Land was either provided as grants, often in 160-acre increments, or sold for as little as \$2.50 per acre (The Week 1884).¹ Under the Sifton ministry, the federal government greatly expanded its efforts to settle the Prairies, looking outside its traditional pool of perspective immigrants in the British Isles, and actively recruiting among Ukrainians, Mennonites, and other groups in the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires (Gagnon, n.d.; International Migration Institute 2015). The subsequent years between 1896 and 1911 marked some of highest in Canadian immigration, in both absolute and per capita terms. Figure 1 shows the passing of the Dominion Lands Act and the beginning of the Sifton inistry in relation to Canadian immigration.

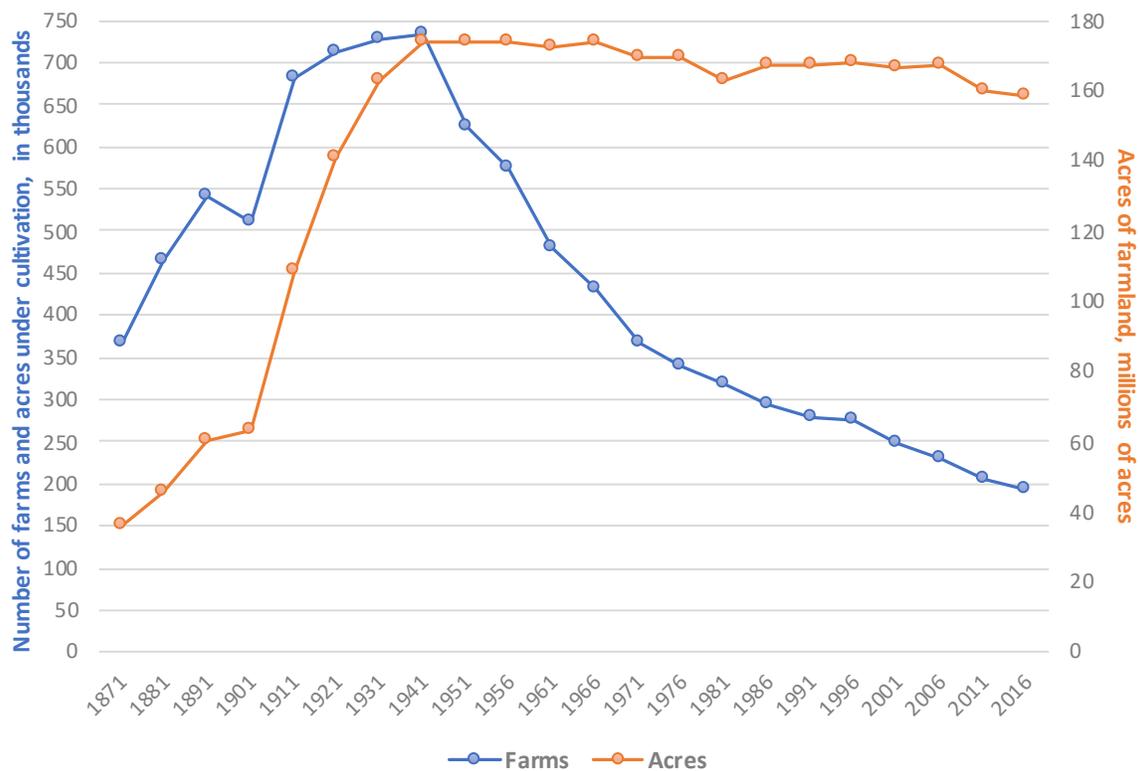
FIGURE 1: IMMIGRATION TO CANADA AND THE DOMINION LANDS ACT AND SIFTON MINISTRY



¹ Approximately \$57 per acre in 2019 dollars (Statistics Canada 2019). By way of comparison, the value of farmland in 2019 was approximately \$3,266 per acre (Statistics Canada 2020).

This era came to be known as the “Wheat Boom,” leading to the establishment of Alberta and Saskatchewan as provinces.² Figure 2 shows the rapid increase in the number of farms during this period, growing by 85 per cent from 368,000 in 1871, to 682,000 in 1911, with acres under cultivation increasing by 300 per cent during the same period (Statistics Canada 1971; Statistics Canada 1971; Statistics Canada 2020). The average farm size grew from 98 acres per farm to 160 acres in that same time frame, not coincidentally the exact size offered under the Dominion Lands Act.

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF FARMS AND FARM ACRES, 1871-2016



The swift expansion in the number of farms and the area under them began to slow following the First World War, with more restrictive immigration policies under the governments of the time, with new arrivals coming to standstill with the onset of the Great Depression (International Migration Institute 2015). At the same time, the federal government noted the beginning of an exodus of young people towards urban centres, concurrent to wartime industrialization and support for technical education in trades to support it (Nicholson 1973). Here, the onset of larger farms is noted in Figure 2. While the number of farms continued to grow, it did so at a slower pace of only seven per cent from 1911 to 1931, while the size of farms grew by 63 per cent, from 160 acres to 224 acres in that same period. The stage set by

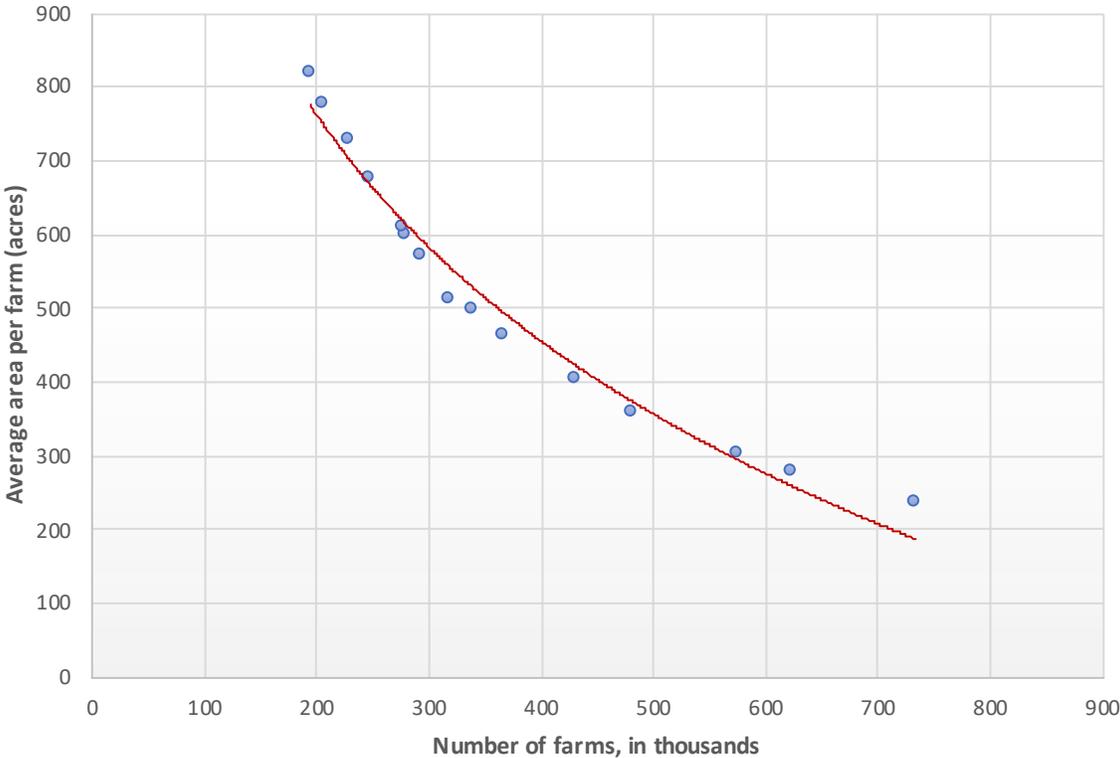
² In Saskatchewan alone, the population expanded by an astonishing 1,125 per cent during the Wheat Boom period (Widds 1992).

Sifton would be fully realized by policies set in the aftermath of the Second World War, leading to the eventual introduction of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP).

SWORDS TO PLOUGHSHARES: POSTWAR CONSOLIDATION OF AGRICULTURE AND THE SHORTAGE OF LABOUR

Beginning with the Second World War, Canadian agriculture underwent a significant transformation related to the consolidation of farms, the employment of labour, and the use of machinery by producers. Consolidation here refers to the acquisition of a larger number of small farms to be combined into a smaller number of larger enterprises, leading to fewer farms with a higher number of acres per farm. The beginning of this phenomenon can be seen in Figure 2, where the number of farms from 1941 plummets (blue line) while the number of acres being cultivated (orange line) remains relatively static. Peaking during the Second World War at 733,000 farms, these independent outfits would be acquired at an increasing pace following the end of the war. Figure 3 shows the relationship between the decline in farm numbers and the increase in average farm size from 1941 to 2016.

FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF FARMS AND THEIR AVERAGE AREA, 1941-2016



From 1941 to 1966, the year in which SAWP was introduced, the number of farms in Canada declined by 41 per cent, from a peak of 733,000 to 431,000, while the average farm size grew from 237 acres to 404 acres, or by 70 per cent (Statistics Canada 2020). Very little farmland was added to the sector during this time.

There are several potential reasons for the significant merger of farmland into single large entities after the War. The Canadian equivalent of the more famous G.I. Bill in the United States, the Veterans Rehabilitation Program, provides some answers.³ This suite of initiatives included vocational training and post-secondary education for veterans, and grants for land and equipment for veterans who wished to pursue farming (Laskin et al. 1947; Neary 2011b). In addition to the provisions for veterans with genuine intentions of farming, the program may have also spurred the selling of farmland and the creation of suburbs through a provision of grants to smallholding farmers with an income derived from outside sources (Neary 2011c). In what has been termed a “reluctant housing program,” veterans could finance or receive 1.6- to 2-acre lots, with Ottawa eventually acquiescing to funding for homes on half-acre lots (Harris and Shulist 2001; Neary 2011a). In addition to advancements in agricultural technology during the War, the rehabilitation program may have created a perfect storm for the mass exodus of small farmers and their families from the agricultural sector and into the cities and suburbs. Those who wished to exit farming had greater means to do so through the provisions intended for smallholders, while those with intentions to keep farming had the financing capability to buy the land of those leaving and the equipment to mechanize their operations. Figure 4 shows the decline in own-account producers and unpaid family members working in agriculture.⁴ From the Second World War to the start of SAWP in 1966, Canadian agriculture experienced an almost 60-per-cent decline in small farmers and unpaid family workers on farms, representing a change of approximately 583,000 workers (Statistics Canada 1975; Statistics Canada 2020).

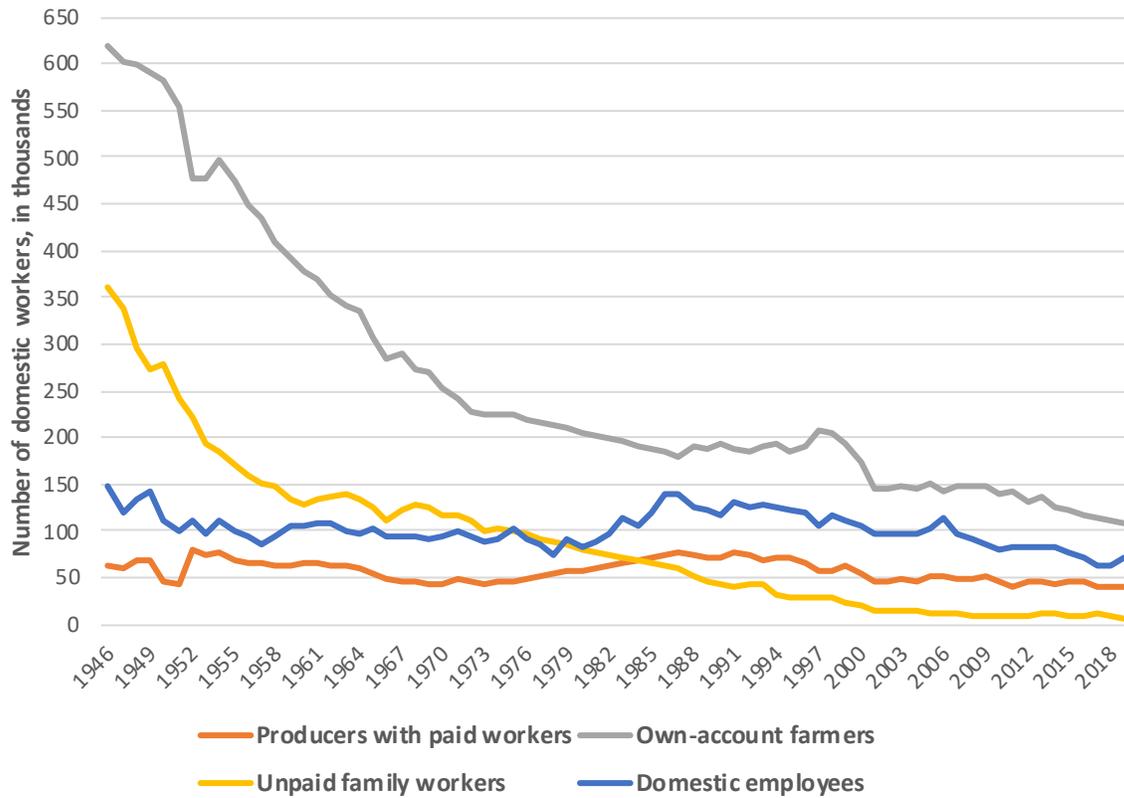
³

Colloquially referred to as the veterans rehabilitation program, this suite of grants, vocational training, financing options, and other veterans' benefits was actually administered under multiple pieces of legislation enacted during the War, and shortly thereafter. They include the Veterans' Land Act (1942), the War Service Grants Act (1944), the Veterans Rehabilitation Act (1945), and the Veterans' Business and Professional Loans Act (1946) (Neary 2004, 2011b).

⁴

“Own-account” refers to self-employed persons without paid employees.

FIGURE 4: DOMESTIC WORKFORCE IN AGRICULTURE, 1946-2019



From the introduction of SAWP in 1966 to 2019, the number of own-account farmers and unpaid family members continually declined, reaching a new low of 117,000 in 2019. While the number of persons working as paid employees in agriculture experienced a brief decline between the end of the Second World War and the 1951 farm census, it has generally remained within a 104,000-person average per year. Only since 2008 have the number of domestic employees begun to fall below the expected range on a consistent basis.⁵

SAWP TAKES ROOT

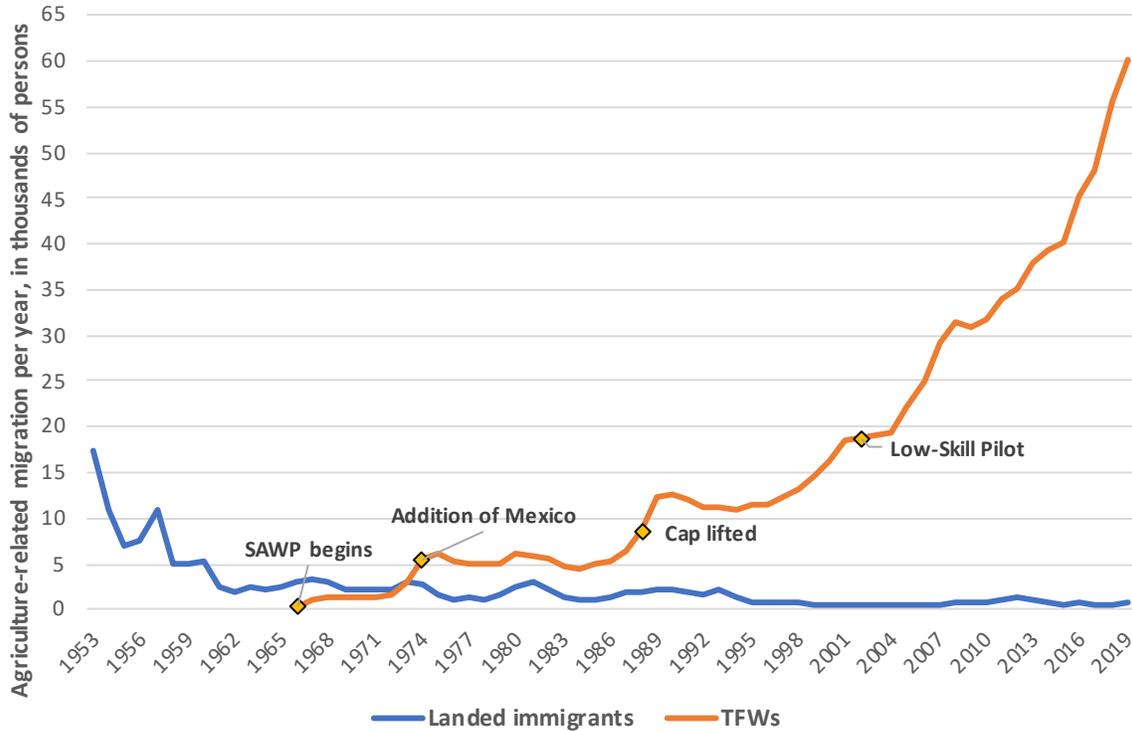
During the Second World War, the federal government had taken active steps towards addressing the labour shortage caused by so many men and women enlisting in the Canadian military and taking jobs in other vital industries. Among these decisions was legislation prohibiting males engaged in agriculture from seeking work elsewhere and exempting students from exams in exchange for working on farms, as well as using POWs, interned Japanese-Canadians, and hiring First Nations living on reserves (Russo 2012) Notably, the “Manpower Program,” as it was called, provided for the transportation and distribution of both American and

⁵ Defined here as one standard deviation from a mean of 103,931 domestic labourers.

Canadian farmhands across the provinces (Ibid.). This set the precedent for future importation of temporary labour that evolved under SAWP.

Postwar efforts to place European refugees on farms proved short-lived. Many of them were from industrial areas of Central and Eastern Europe and had little inclination towards long-term settlement and employment in farming communities. Created in 1950, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration continued its attempts at bolstering the agricultural sector by focusing on a declining number of European refugees (International Migration Institute 2015). These results of these attempts can be seen in Figure 5, with brief bumps in farm-related migration associated with the placement of Hungarian refugees on farms in 1957. What became clear, however, was that refugee resettlement would not be a primary source for new workers in agriculture, even as the consolidation of farms and the loss of own-account and unpaid farmhands continued.

FIGURE 5: AGRICULTURAL IMMIGRATION TO CANADA, PERMANENT AND TEMPORARY, 1953-2019



Beginning in 1966, SAWP was initiated as a labour-migration agreement between the Canadian and Jamaican governments, allowing labourers from Jamaica to come temporarily to Canada to work in agricultural production before returning home (Budworth, Rose, and Mann 2017). It would eventually expand to include 10 other Caribbean states and Mexico, the latter joining in 1974 (ESDC 2020; Preibish 2007). The demand for workers was evident in the immediate uptick in TFWs that

followed the Canada-Mexico SAWP agreement, and again following the removal of the annual quota by the Mulroney government in 1988, as shown in Figure 5 (Russo 2012). Finally, in 2002, the low-skilled pilot allowed for the expansion of TFWs into secondary food production, such as meat- or seafood-packing plants (Fudge and MacPhail 2009; Preibish 2007; Nakache 2013). A gap that had been created in the consolidation of Canadian farms in the aftermath of the Second World War would, in part, be addressed through the employment of labour from abroad. Unlike the Sifton years, however, foreign labour initiatives would be focused on fieldhands, not farmers, with the expectation that they eventually return home, not settle in Canada.

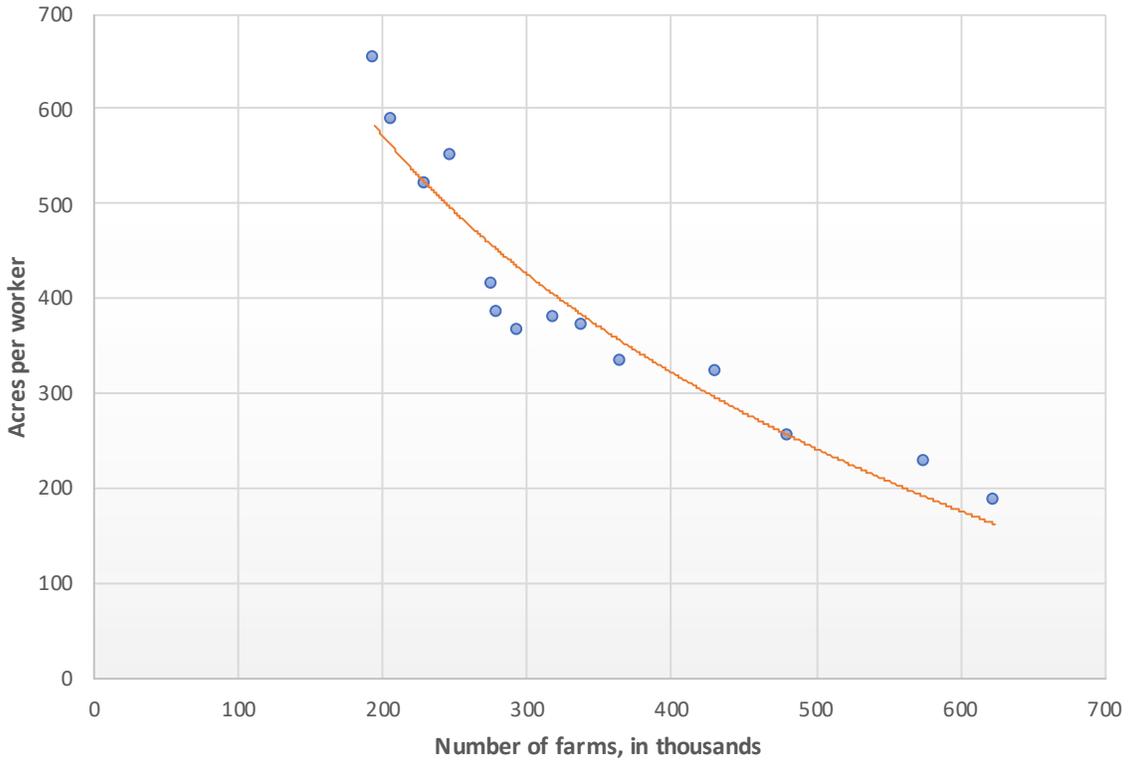
THE “KEYSTONE” OF MODERN AGRICULTURE

Between 1966 and 1988 the number of TFWs working in Canadian agriculture grew to comprise 1.9 per cent of the total workforce in the sector. It would rise again after the quota was removed, reaching new heights in 2002 at 5.8 per cent. It currently sits at 20.9 per cent as of 2019. When considering just paid employees in the industry, this number rises to 46 per cent as of 2019. As one industrialist put it, temporary foreign workers have become the “keystone” of the agricultural sector (Preibish 2007).

The keystone metaphor is drawn from architecture and describes the role a central stone in the middle of an arch plays in bearing the weight of the rest of the structure. As we will describe here, while other components — such as capital investment and wage increases — play a vital role in sustaining the industry, the notion of increasing weight being put on temporary foreign workers in agriculture is an apt comparison.

As a result of the consolidation of Canadian agriculture into fewer, larger farms, the number of acres being worked by each labourer has increased substantially. Amalgamated outfits gain the land of the previously small outfits, but lose in the process the families that worked them. Unless these larger outfits can source sufficient labour for their farms, the average area covered by existing workers grows. Figure 6 shows how the consolidation of farms into fewer outfits coincided with an increased area of farmland needing to be covered by remaining workers.

FIGURE 6: ACRES FARMED PER WORKER, 1951-2016



Two ways in which employers may address the increased acreage covered by each worker is through increased hiring, usually through wage increases, or by increasing the productive output of each worker, often through technological innovations (capital investment). We provide evidence to suggest that producers are engaging in both activities. Figure 7 shows the rise in real wages from 1946 to 2019, even as the number of domestic labourers has declined, while Figure 8 shows the real value of farm investments. In Figure 8, we also include the number of tractors per 1,000 acres on the right-hand axis as a measure of innovation on farms.

FIGURE 7: DOMESTIC WORKERS AND MONTHLY WAGES, 2019 DOLLARS, 1946-2019

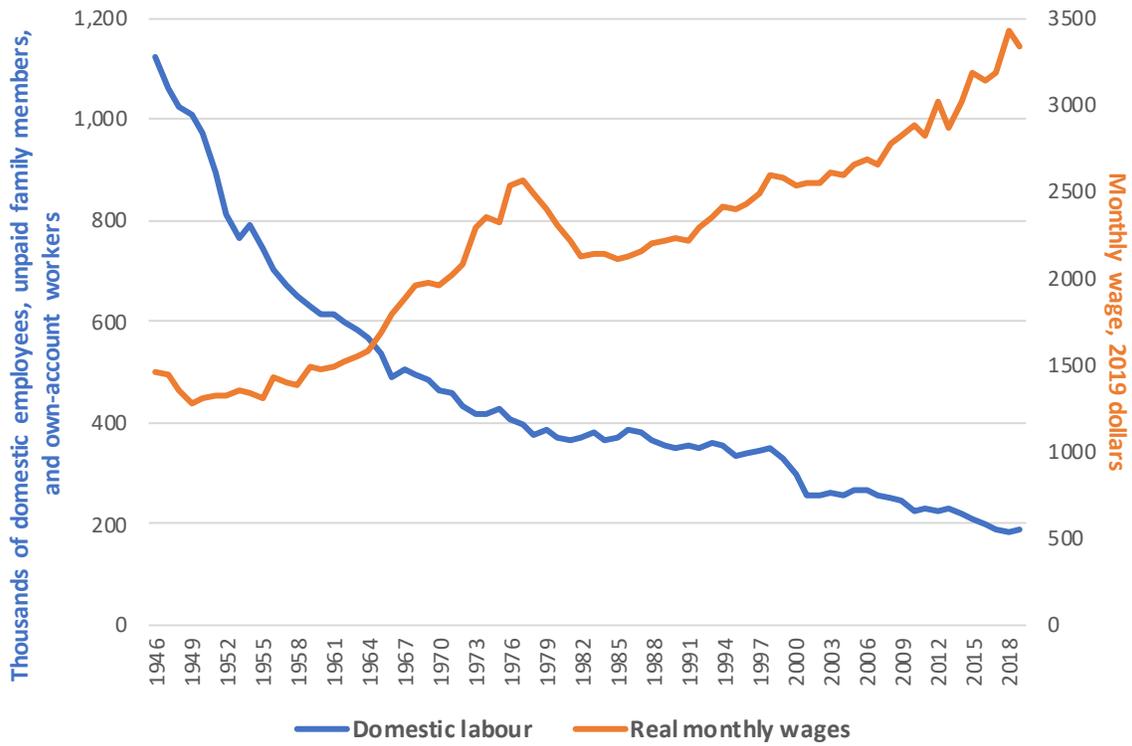


FIGURE 8: VALUE OF FARM EQUIPMENT, 2019 DOLLARS, 1926-2019

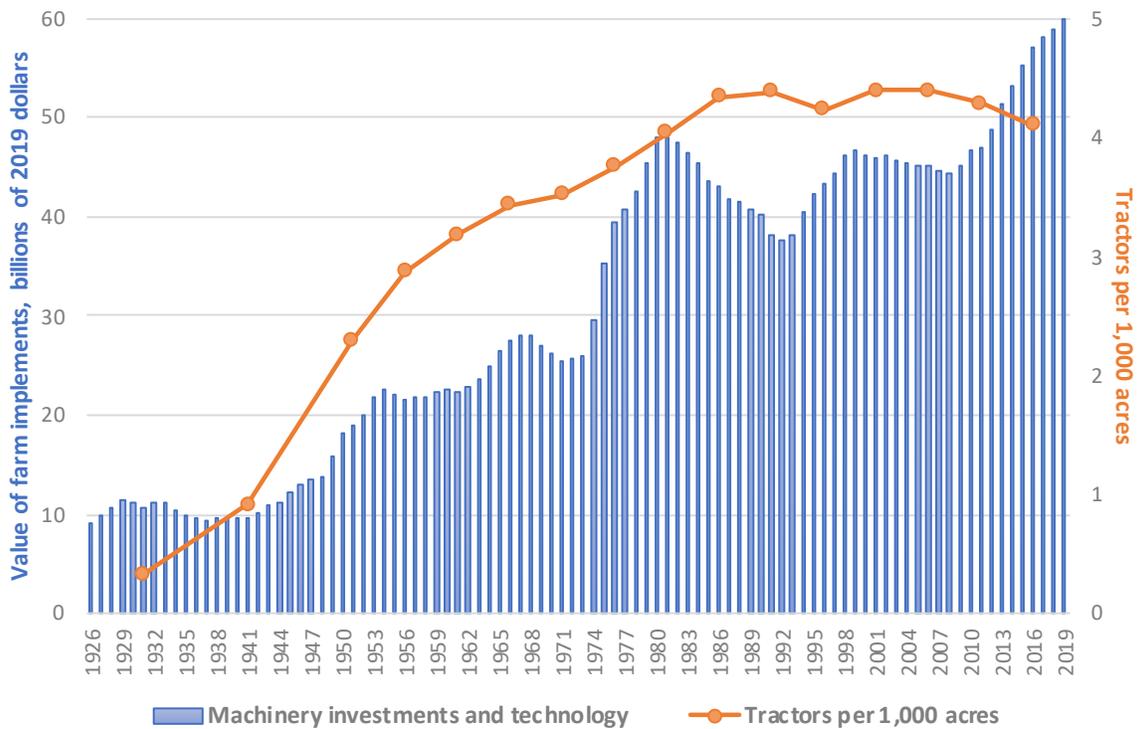
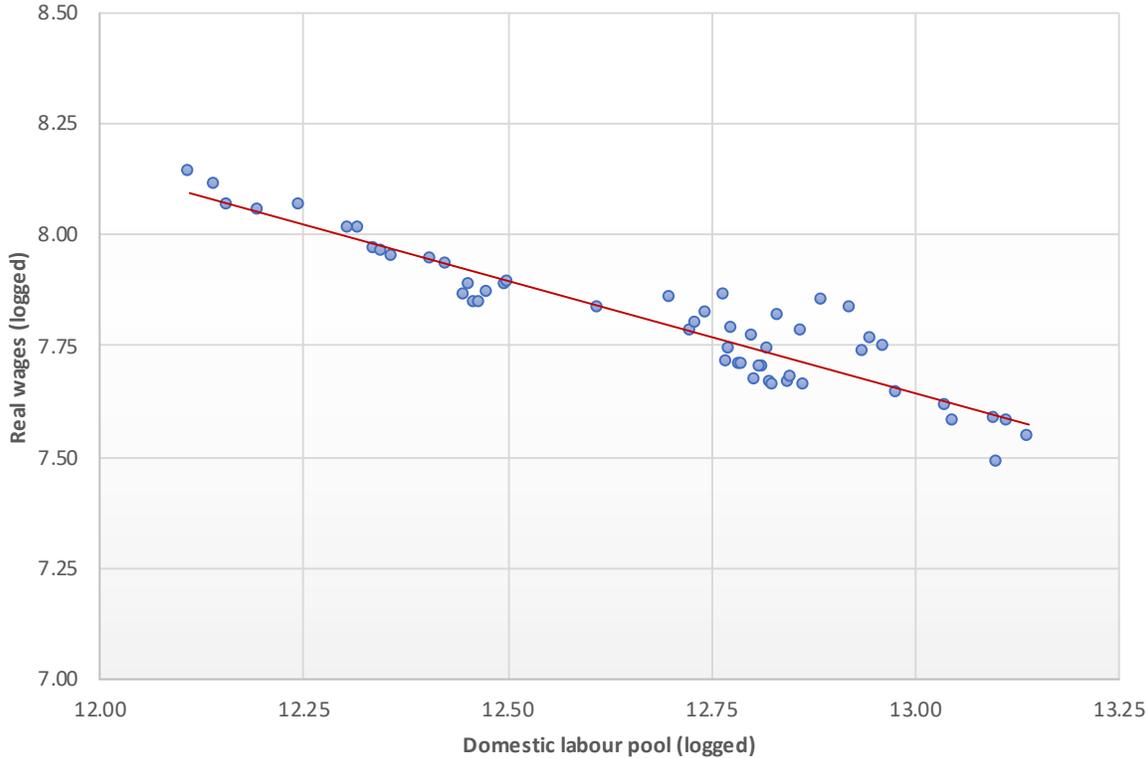


Figure 9 shows, however, that domestic participation in farm labour has declined even as wages have increased. Potential reasons include the physical difficulty of the work, the need to travel considerable distances to farms and processing plants or to live onsite, and the ability to work fewer hours to achieve the same desired income (ESDC 2014; ESDC 2019; Preibish 2007). Some combination of these, plus other factors, are responsible for the decline in domestic labour, even as wages have risen.

FIGURE 9: CHANGE IN WAGES AND DOMESTIC LABOUR POOL



Rather than ask what forces led domestic workers away from the farms, let us consider what draws foreign workers. Mexico is currently the source of 52 per cent of Canada’s migrant agricultural workers (Falconer 2020). Looking briefly at the Mexican labour market, from 1994 to 2009 it expanded significantly more slowly than its expanding labour force: 2.3 per cent annual growth in the market, while its working age population between 15 and 64 years of age grew by over 18 million new workers (Pederzini 2012). Large numbers of Mexican workers emigrated to Canada from 1960 to 2000, following our history of supplementing the labour force with immigrants as discussed earlier. Ayedemir (2006) has determined that in Canada, international migration has narrowed wage inequality, while in Mexico, international migration increased the relative wages of workers in the middle of the skill set, in addition to providing remittances to families and relatives back home. Of the major actors in the setting of immigration policy in

Canada, the main winner is business, benefitting from an inflow of labourers while lowering wages (Green 2004, Ayedemir 2006). That said, both wages and the number of foreign workers has risen considerably from 1966 through 2019, as shown in Figure 10.

It is obvious that, over the last 60 years, Mexico has provided a willing source of skilled and unskilled labour, and Canada has been a willing recipient of that labour, including not only permanent immigrants but also migrant seasonal agriculture workers.

FIGURE 10: CHANGE IN WAGES AND DOMESTIC LABOUR POOL, 2019 DOLLARS, 1966-2019

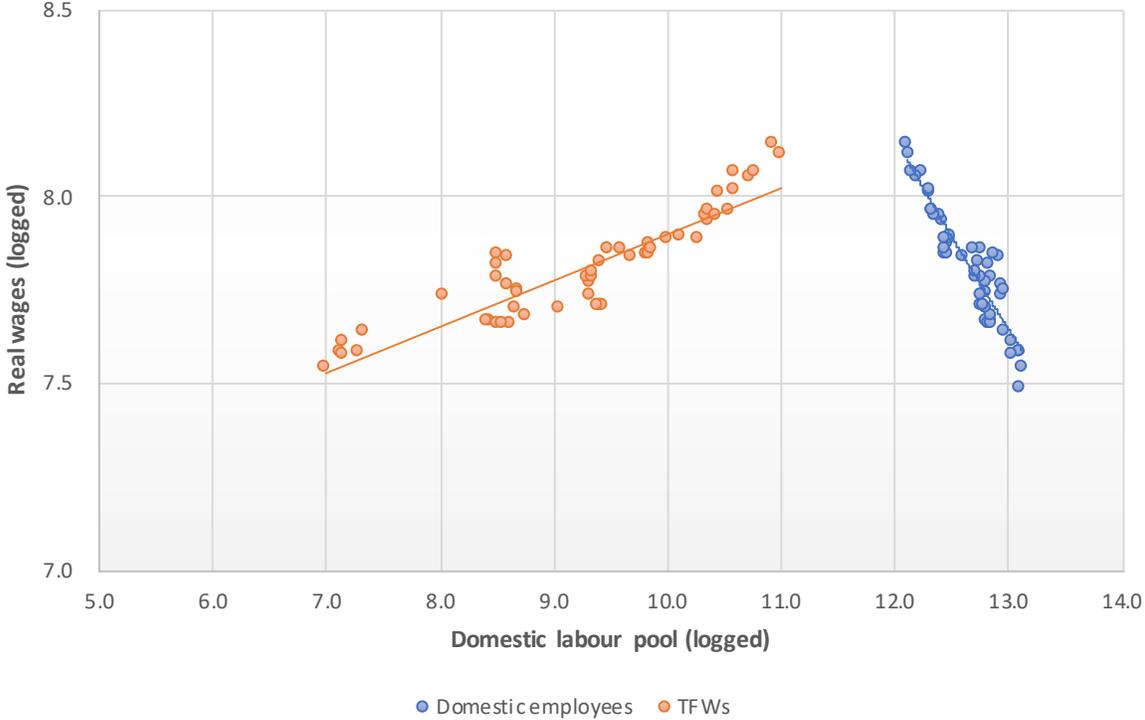
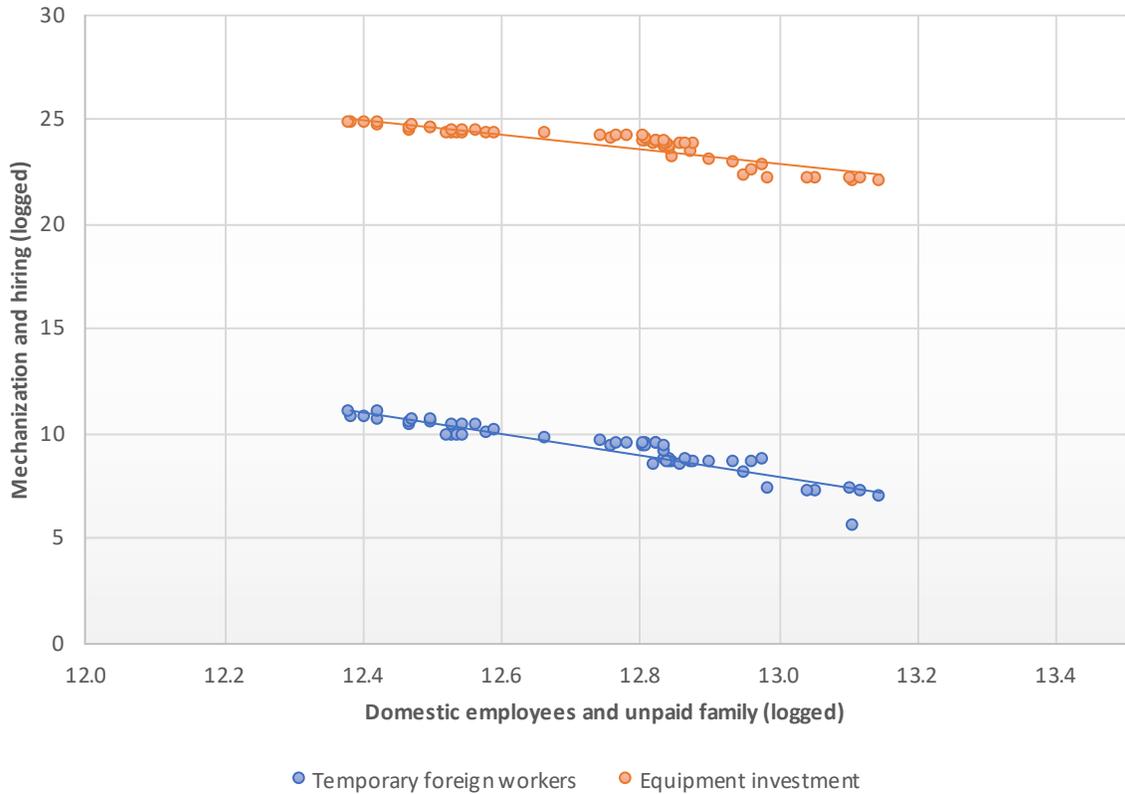


Figure 11 illustrates that Canadian farmers have historically increased returns and yields by first attempting to hire local workers through wage increases and then replacing the loss of domestic labour with both foreign labour through SAWP and other TFW programs in agriculture, and secondly through the increased use of technology (capital investment).

FIGURE 11: AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION AND TFW EMPLOYMENT



Without the employment of foreign workers in Canadian agriculture, addressing the labour gap comes at a cost, either in additional capital or higher labour costs. In that case, without external support, including subsidies, producers will be forced to choose between raising prices and losing market share, or accepting a lower level of productivity. In both scenarios, Canadians may be faced with supermarket shelves featuring both higher prices and a greater reliance on imported food. The idea, then, of foreign workers being the keystone of Canadian agriculture, seems all the more appropriate.

CANADA’S CHOICES

Canada’s historical policies have led to migrant farm workers being a large and indispensable part of the industry. As noted earlier, TFWs comprise 20.9 per cent of the total sector workforce as of 2019, and 46 per cent of total paid employees in the industry in 2019. The COVID-19 crisis has led policy-makers to ask if domestic workers could replace some or all of the delayed, deferred, or ill migrant farm workers in the short term, and perhaps in the longer term as well. Hiring replacement workers with no training is expected to result in significant reductions in output, and higher costs for consumers (Smith 2020; Valiante 2020). As seen from the data in Figure 8, higher wages were not historically successful in attracting and retaining domestic workers in the sector. SAWP has been actively increasing

migrant farm worker numbers in Canada for 54 years. This is, indeed, a keystone in Canada's agricultural industry.

A different view of the issue of migrant agricultural workers considers what they bring to Canada, in addition to their labour skills. In the past, immigration has been used to meet specific goals: to cultivate land and provide labour for developing resource sectors in the 1920s and again in the 1950s, to increase the skill level of the Canadian workforce and fill perceived gaps in the occupational structure in the 1960s and 1970s, and to attempt to offset the aging of the native-born population in the late 1980s (Green 2004). In times of higher unemployment, immigration numbers have been reduced, recognizing the domestic labour resources available (Ibid.). Historically, there has been tension between two policy views of immigration: the view of immigration primarily as a short-term, labour-market policy tool, versus those who believe in its longer-term benefits as an engine of future economic growth (Ibid.). In this instance, a Canadian industry has over the years become substantially dependent on migrant agriculture workers to the extent that now, with pressures impacting their arrival and their numbers, the economic viability of businesses will suffer. In that regard, the migrant workers are a permanent part of the Canadian economy. Therefore, we find in this rare instance that the recommendation of potentially increasing immigration numbers through modifications to the TFW program, while protecting the health and social supports of migrant farm workers, will meet both the short-term labour market needs in the agriculture sector and Canada's future economic growth. This can both protect the long-term success of the sector and promote the growth of Canada's economy.

SECURING WORKERS AND PROTECTING AGRICULTURE

The drop in arriving TFWs due to COVID-19 and the spread of the pandemic among the migrant workers present in Canada have exposed the vulnerabilities in our agricultural governance system (Rodriguez 2020; Yasmeen, Alexander, and Paskal 2020). The data presented in previous sections show that replacing TFWs with domestic workers is a notion built on a mythologized past, wherein the agricultural sector employed large numbers of local workers. In truth, the workforce of yesteryear was comprised of farm owners and their families, most of whom went unpaid, while domestic employees supplied a smaller percentage of the total labour than they do today, and only for short periods of time.⁶ Producers have addressed the exit of small farmers and their families from the agricultural workforce by first offering higher wages to domestic employees, and then filling the gap with capital investments in innovative farm technologies and through global expansion of the labour supply. Taking into consideration these factors, especially the vital role played by foreign workers, means that policy responses that address these vulnerabilities should not focus on the return to an imagined past. They

⁶ Domestic labour supplied 25 per cent of the total workforce in agriculture for 2019. In 1946, domestic labour supplied only 12 per cent of the total workforce (Statistics Canada 1976, 2020).

should instead address the short- and long-term health concerns of workers. These should be accompanied by policy responses that address the viability of producers employing foreign and domestic workers, and provide workers with long-term opportunities and incentives to return to Canada in future seasons. We provide a few suggestions below, based on our own observations and the research of others. Policy-makers should consider all of them in relation to protecting the lives of workers and securing our food supply chain.

First, policy-makers at the federal level should reconsider the ability of foreign workers to access employment insurance (EI), and, in particular, sickness benefits. If workers are able to take off time without fearing a complete loss of income, they may be less likely to risk working while sick, thereby expose their colleagues to the possible spread of disease. Restoring maternity and paternity benefits for TFWs, even if their spouse is located abroad, may be especially important so that spouses working in Canada are faced with less financial difficulty when making the decision to take time off (Siemiatycki 2010; Nakache 2013).

Second, provincial and federal agencies and ministries should work together to verify enforcement of public health regulations and guidelines on worksites, including reasonable housing standards, the ability of workers to self-isolate when necessary, and the ability of workers to physically distance (ESDC 2020). While normally focused on food-safety testing, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency provides an example of one agency with public employees who are routinely onsite to sample and test the quality and safety of food for both local consumption and export (CFIA 2020). Under current regulations, the CFIA can address noncompliance with food-safety standards through notification of manufacturers, importers, additional inspections, product seizure, or recall. Given the extraordinary circumstances, the federal government should consider enabling these and other agencies related to food production to inspect worksites and inform other agencies of adherence to public health guidelines.

Third, federal and provincial governments should consider addressing producer-side policies in relation to public safety standards. British Columbia provides one example where the costs of self-isolation for incoming workers are shared between the province and employers (BC Public Safety 2020). The province covers the hotel and food-service costs during the 14-day isolation period, as well as socioeconomic and cultural supports to workers during the quarantine period. Employers remain responsible for covering the wages of workers during this 14-day period, for a minimum of 30 hours per week. Ontario provides another example, where a federal-provincial partnership has expanded coverage of AgriInsurance to include labour shortages (AAFC 2020). Other provinces should consider similar federal-provincial partnerships. Coverage could also be expanded to include food processors, upon whose viability primary agriculturalists depend to package and ship crops and livestock. These and other initiatives may garner buy-in from producers for public health guidelines onsite and sustain them during the pandemic. In the medium term, subsidized construction of new housing onsite, either through a direct

partnership from the government or through the tax system (such as immediate discounting of capital costs) are ways to prepare for the possibility of more pandemics in the future.

Finally, the federal government and provinces should consider expanded opportunities for permanent residency for TFWs in agriculture. While not an immediate way of addressing the pandemic, it offers a long-term solution towards bolstering and securing the well-being of workers and Canadian food production. Currently, just eight per cent of TFWs in food production and transportation become permanent residents each year (IRCC 2020). When broken down by specific sectors, the low transition rate to permanent residency becomes even more apparent. Fewer than two per cent of TFWs in general farm labour become permanent residents each year. This number rises to 27 per cent in food processing, and 96 per cent in transportation. Compared to domestic workers, the reliability of TFWs in agriculture is more attractive: in general, they take fewer sick days, are more productive, and return throughout multiple seasons (Brochu, Gross, and Worswick 2016; Preibish 2007). Some producers may worry about a risk to the supply of foreign workers if they become permanent residents, enabling them to leave the farm. Using transportation as an example, however, provides us with a clear picture that, even with high transition rates to permanent residency, the number of TFWs in this sector has grown. It may be that the opportunity to gain permanent residency in Canada will provide additional incentives for foreign workers to come and work in the sector.

One way to do this is to expand the Agri-Food Pilot program (IRCC 2020). This program allows employers to sponsor the immigration of non-seasonal workers located primarily in secondary food processing, capped at an annual quota of 2,750 applications per year. The federal government may consider expanding this to seasonal workers with experience working multiple seasons in Canada. Allowing seasonal workers to meet a certain number of hours over the course of a particular time frame would allow producers to retain experienced workers for a period, while granting workers the opportunity to immigrate permanently.

CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO A MYTHICAL PAST OR MOVING FORWARD

The purpose of this paper is to show Canadians the vital role foreign labour plays in stocking our shelves and adding to our prosperity. In the current era of COVID-19, some among the general public and policy-makers may feel that now is the appropriate time to shutter the entrance of foreign workers into Canadian agriculture. Experience has shown that this has simply resulted in greater labour shortages at the onset of the food-production season (Brown 2020). The idea that Canadian labourers will seek out physical intensive and highly seasonal employment in agriculture hearkens to a mythical past that never existed. History has shown that it is the smallholder farmers and unpaid family members that have traditionally

borne the weight of Canadian food production, with paid employees comprising only a fraction of the total workforce. In transitioning away from smaller outfits to large industrial enterprises, Canadian agriculture has lost the work of these small farmers and their family members. Producers continue to struggle to fill the gap created by their exit from the industry.

The labour gap created by the exit of smallholders and unpaid family worker has coincided with increased technological innovations on farms. The creation and expansion of SAWP and other temporary agricultural programs have also corresponded with an increase in the number of migrant workers coming to Canada on temporary visas each year. The true story of seasonal migration to Canada may have very little to do with the displacement of local workers and the transition from unpaid labour to innovation and paid labour, albeit of an international flavour. These workers have contributed immensely to filling the labour gap — working in our fields, on our ranches, and in our processing plants, among other areas of food production. Taking immediate steps to protect their lives, health, and well-being would benefit workers and secure our immediate labour supply. Expanding their access to permanent residency may also secure the long-term supply of labour, providing workers with additional incentives to work in agriculture. It would also be in keeping with one of Canada's oldest narratives, one that built Western Canada and continues to build our country today: The recruitment and immigration of “stalwart peasants...born on the soil” with “indifference as to their [birth or nationality]” (Sifton 1922).

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ISSN

ISSN 2560-8312 The School of Public Policy Publications (Print)
ISSN 2560-8320 The School of Public Policy Publications (Online)

DATE OF ISSUE

August 2020

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