



News release

New protections spell positive change for Ontario's seasonal and temporary farm workers

For immediate release

Guelph ON, 13 August 2024 – The last wave of seasonal agricultural workers will shortly be arriving in Ontario for the start of fall harvest, particularly apples. As employers and communities prepare to welcome these workers, Ontario farmers point to how much positive change has taken place in recent years around the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program's agricultural stream.

“Many critics still use outdated and misleading language when discussing these programs, ignoring the significant new protections and safeguards that have been added to the program in recent years to address legitimate concerns.” says Bill George, grape grower and chair of the Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association (OFVGA) Labour Committee. “A latest case is the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, whose extreme language to describe the TFW program is particularly troubling to farmers.”

Among the biggest changes has been a provision of open work permits for vulnerable workers that started in 2019 and lets those workers freely seek employment with any other government-approved TFW employer. This complements existing mobility for workers, including their ability to apply for a new work permit while they are already working in the province. Workers in SAWP can also request to be transferred to a different approved employer by their country's liaison office without having to go through the process of applying for a new work permit.

Starting in 2024, Ontario is also changing how it compensates injured workers through the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, and new federal rules introduced in 2022 provide additional protections from retribution and reprisals for workers who come forward regarding unsatisfactory working conditions. Workers have a variety of mechanisms to reach out for assistance, including a toll-free 24-hour federal government hotline that was introduced in 2021 and in the case of SAWP employees, liaison officers from their home countries who can provide assistance.

Earlier this year, the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology released a report that included six recommendations it believes could improve Canada's TFW programs, many of which farm employers have also been calling for to strengthen and streamline the program for workers and employers.

“These recent changes are in direct response to challenges identified with these programs and employers working with government and worker advocacy organizations,” adds George. “Seasonal and



temporary foreign workers are an essential part of local fruit and vegetable production in Ontario, and while we recognize that there is always more than can be done to ensure workers have a safe and positive experience working here, we are proud of the many positive changes that have already been made as well as efforts that remain ongoing.”

Every year, Ontario fruit and vegetable growers employ approximately 20,000 seasonal and temporary foreign workers who come to Canada legally through the government regulated Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program’s agricultural stream.

Through its [More than a Migrant Worker](#) initiative, the OFVGA has been empowering seasonal and temporary farm workers in Ontario who take pride in the work they do here by giving them a platform to tell their stories in their own words. At the same time, the initiative draws attention to the critical role that legal international farm workers play in the Canadian food system and efforts by farmers and government in recent years to invest in worker safety, protection and well-being.

The [Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers’ Association](#) is the voice of Ontario’s fruit and vegetable producers on issues affecting the horticulture sector.

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Additional agricultural TFW program background

Workers apply in their home countries for the opportunity to be part of these programs in Canada and sign legal contracts when accepting employment. All contracts are subject to federal government audits and inspections to ensure they follow program regulations and match the job specifications that the employer received government approval for when workers were hired. SAWP contract terms also reflect decades of collaborative negotiations between Canada and the workers' home countries, which include Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados, and the Eastern Caribbean Islands.

Canadian farmers who employ migrant farm workers under either of these two government programs have the same and, in some cases, higher obligations to their temporary foreign workers as they do for their Canadian employees, including government-approved wage rates, access to health care such as OHIP in Ontario, Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan as well as workplace insurance coverage and safety protection. Farms are also required to provide every worker with a copy of the federal government's publication outlining workers' rights and protections to ensure they are aware of their rights.

To ensure these requirements are being followed in practice, farms are subject to frequent federal, provincial, and in many cases, foreign government compliance inspections.

Workers with SAWP or TFW program permits have access to a multilingual, 24/7 federal government support line they can use to raise concerns and seek help relating to their current employment. For SAWP workers, local liaison officers from their home countries are also available to provide support and address complaints related to their employment in Canada. If workers are unable to have their specific employment-related concerns resolved through these channels, an open work permit program is available for vulnerable workers in these situations.