

Challenges and Solutions for Domestic Labour in BC's Tree Fruit and Wine Grape Industries

Proposed pathways for the Federal Government to support BC's tree fruit and wine grape industries through domestic labour development.



Background:

In 2023, five tree fruit and wine grape industry organizations came together to launch the Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project (CCLSP) with the goal of working collectively on key industry challenges. In 2024, the CCLSP partnered with Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) to carry out a research project to understand the domestic labour challenges in the BC tree fruit and wine grape sectors.

Interviews with growers and workers highlighted key challenges and informed recommended actions. Precedent research identified effective policies in Canada and abroad that support domestic labour and strengthen the viability of the agriculture sector.

This brief summarizes the key challenges and recommendations emerging from the research. Learn more at crosscommodity.org.

Key Domestic Labour Challenges:

Growers:

- Worker reliability
- Worker retention
- Lack of skilled labour available
- Recruitment
- Shrinking bottom line of farm operations

Workers:

- Lack of available housing and high cost of living
- Low wages and unreliable payment
- Difficult working conditions often due to climate related events
- Competing for roles with illegal workers willing to work for low wages
- Unpredictable availability of work and short working season

Various actions can strengthen the domestic workforce—but lasting change will require **coordinated effort** by all levels of government and industry partners. The federal government can:

1. Support Housing and Amenity Improvements

- Distribute subsidies to directly support housing costs through employment or income assistance programs. Payments could be structured seasonally and tied to documented work placements like [New Zealand's Seasonal Work Scheme](#).
- Support growers with financial assistance or programs to reduce regulatory hurdles to build or improve on-farm accommodations and amenities, such as kitchens, washrooms, rest areas, and designated camping infrastructure. Programs akin to the [USDA's Farm Labour Housing Loans](#) or Canada's former [Canada Plan Service](#) in partnership with local governments could alleviate the housing and amenity burden for growers.

2. Advance Local Education and Skill Training Opportunities

- Support apprenticeship programs in partnership with industry associations and post-secondary institutions to grow the local skilled labour market. This can be accomplished by explicitly targeting the tree fruit and wine grape sectors through programs like the [ESDC's Student Work Placement Program](#).

3. Support Worker Recruitment and Retention Efforts

- Offer wage top-ups for agriculture workers to remain in the industry or through financial assistance to workers who have lost wages due to climate events like New Zealand's [Seasonal Work Assistance Program](#).
- Offer subsidies or funding programs in partnership with industry associations or provincial ministries for those looking to join the industry through relocation funding programs like Australia's former [AgMove Program](#).
- In partnership with industry associations, offer tuition credits (like [Sport Canada's Athlete Assistance Program](#)) or grants for post-secondary students who complete a summer season of agricultural work.

- Provide employer subsidies to hire local workers like Spain's [Agricultural Employment Promotion Program](#).
- Target recruitment efforts for groups with potential for long-term engagement in agriculture (like students) by heightening the focus of agriculture as a career through [Young Canadians Canada Summer Jobs program](#).
- Develop collaborative programs with Indigenous organizations and communities to support tree fruit and wine grape specialized training, certification, and job-matching services similar to the [Natural Resources Training Group's Indigenous Training Program](#).

4. Promote Public Awareness and Advocacy

- As part of ESDC's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), carry out stronger efforts to promote legal and documented hiring practices and educate on the economic and legal consequences of relying on informal or undocumented labourers. This could include

providing educational materials to applicants, requiring applicants to complete a short training module before approval, and enforcing stricter penalties—like banning non-compliant employers from not only the TFWP but other federal agriculture support programs.

- Review the TFWP under ESDC to improve protections for workers while ensuring the program supports rather than undermines domestic recruitment. Explore program alterations that would allow workers to work across multiple farms to reduce illegal work at substandard wages.
- Review and reform existing working visa extension requirements to allow working visa holders to extend their stay by continuing employment in the agricultural sector as seen in Australia's [Working Holiday VISA Extension](#).
- Explore changes to Employment Insurance benefits for agricultural workers by considering lowering the minimum qualifying hours for any agriculture work.

Strengthening Canada's domestic agricultural workforce in support of the tree fruit and wine grape industries demands decisive action from the federal government. Strategic investments in housing, education, and recruitment—alongside targeted policy reforms—can help to stabilize the sector and reduce dependence on precarious labour. Such actions will especially benefit small and medium-sized growers, which make up a significant portion of the industry. By modernizing worker protections and promoting domestic engagement, the federal government can help build a more resilient and equitable agricultural labour system in the tree fruit and wine grape sectors.

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