

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

Proposed pathways for Industry 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](https://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**. All levels of government and industry partners have a role to play. Industry can:

## 1. Advance Local Education and Skill Training Opportunities

- Partner with all levels of government to develop hands-on training programs modeled after [AgSkilled \(Australia\)](#), [Young Agrarians \(BC\)](#), and [KPU's Farm School](#), offering short-term, skill-based agricultural training that is regionally tailored and industry co-led.
- With the support of the provincial government, collaborate with post-secondary institutions to expand viticulture, horticulture, and sustainable agriculture programs, using successful examples like [Brook University's Wine Program](#), [UCD's Ag Science degree](#), and [KPU's Sustainable Agricultural Program](#). Industry to assist by offering input on curriculum development, and providing practicum placements for students.
- Work with BC's Ministry of Labour, BC's Ministry of Agriculture and Food, and other provincial ministries to improve on-farm orientation and safety training by supporting tools like the [AgSafe HR Toolkits](#), [CASA's employee safety training](#), [BC MAF Apple Load Management Video](#), and [Agri Academy's online micro-courses \(New Zealand\)](#).

## 2. Support Worker Recruitment and Retention Efforts

- Re-establish a Domestic Labour Liaison position, such as the previous [BC Fruit Growers' Association Liaison Position](#). The BC Fruit Growers Association liaison role was highly valued by producers for providing hands-on support with recruitment, onboarding, and training, and a renewed position through BC Fruit Works could include one-on-one assistance with job matching, coordinating training workshops, and acting as a bridge between industry, job-seekers, and government programs.
- Work with provincial government ministries such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, and the Ministry of Education and Child Care to launch targeted labour recruitment campaigns to promote agriculture work as a respectable employment option like [Pick for Britain \(UK\)](#), [Das Land Hilft \(Germany\)](#), and [HortNZ's career pathway outreach](#).
- In partnership with provincial government ministries such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, and the Ministry of Education and Child Care, target recruitment efforts toward youth, underrepresented groups, and career switchers using programs like the [Young Canadian Summer Jobs](#).

- Through BC Fruit Works and in partnership with the BC Ministry of Labour, foster a positive workplace culture grounded in respect and fair treatment. Resources like [AgSafe's HR toolkit](#) and the [Western Forestry Contractors' anti-harassment commitments](#) offer clear guidance.
- Improve workplace culture by training supervisors, setting expectations for respectful conduct, and organizing inclusive social events, such as those hosted by the [Lower Similkameen Community Services Society](#) for Temporary Foreign Workers.
- Through BC Fruit Works, explore development of a portable benefits plan to support worker retention, modeled after the [BC Agriculture Council Employee Benefits Program](#).
- Partner with Indigenous communities and provincial and federal governments to develop training, certification, and job placement programs, using the [Natural Resources Training Group's Indigenous Employment Program](#). Industry to provide paid placements, collaborate on program design, and support mentorship networks.
- Work with provincial governments to formalize a seasonal 'work circuit' connecting agricultural work with silviculture and ski hill jobs. Appoint representatives to a steering committee as needed to advise on program implementation.
- Pilot peer-led recruitment strategies such as referral bonuses and promoting peer-to-peer outreach, modeled after the [Blue Mountain Resort Student Referral Program](#), which incentivizes workers to refer friends.

### 3. Promote Public Awareness and Advocacy

- In partnership with federal and provincial governments, develop and share educational campaigns through BC Fruit Works that inform growers and workers about the economic and legal consequences of informal or undocumented labour, particularly in the context of workplace safety and liability.
- Engage with municipal and provincial governments to advocate for improvements to worker housing policies, by addressing permitting, zoning restrictions, and funding limitations that prevent the development of adequate housing.
- Work with the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food to secure long-term operational funding for BC Fruit Works, positioning it as a permanent workforce coordination hub to implement research-backed recommendations and regional outreach.
- Through BC Fruit Works, conduct a grower needs assessment or audit through structured surveys and interviews to understand HR and labour practices, and use findings to inform outreach strategies.

### 4. Review and Reform Policy

- In partnership with the provincial government, advocate for federal reforms to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program that allows workers to move between

farms and improve working conditions. Look to international models like Australia's [PALM scheme](#) and New Zealand's [RSE Scheme](#).

- Work with local governments and the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) to advise on the alignment of zoning and development and ALC policies that support the development of workforce housing and farm infrastructure in key growing regions.
- Advocate for Employment Insurance (EI) reform that expands eligibility and off-season support for farm workers, including lower minimum qualifying hours to reflect the seasonal nature of agricultural work.

### 5. Support Industry Viability

- In partnership with the provincial government, create centralized HR and compliance resources through BC Fruit Works to support small and medium-scale growers. Tools like [AgSafe's HR Toolkit](#) offer templates and self-assessment forms that help employers meet legal and ethical obligations.
- In partnership with the provincial government and HR professionals, deliver accessible workforce management training – including respectful leadership, labour law, and team supervision themes – through online modules and workshops delivered by BC Fruit Works.

The long-term sustainability of BC's tree fruit and wine grape industries depends on a stable and skilled workforce. While government support is essential, industry leadership is equally critical. Industry organizations are uniquely positioned to lead on-the-ground implementation of these recommendations, strengthening recruitment pathways, fostering positive work environments, and advocating for the tools and policies needed to support growers and workers alike. Through collective action, coordinated outreach, and a commitment to respectful, inclusive employment practices, industry organizations can help build a resilient domestic labour market.

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