

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

Proposed pathways for Local 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**. All levels of government and industry partners have a role to play. Local governments can:

1. Support Housing and Amenity Improvements

- Conduct a feasibility study to explore the development of off-farm affordable seasonal worker housing – permanent and/or temporary (i.e. camping) – in partnership with the provincial government and industry. Continue to support and improve the [Secrest Hill Agricultural Worker's Campsite](#) as a pilot program.

- Streamline permitting and regulatory processes for growers seeking to build or upgrade on-farm worker amenities such as washrooms, kitchens, and camping infrastructure. Work with senior governments to explore the development of pre-approved infrastructure plans for the agriculture sector like the former [Canada Plan Service \(CPS\)](#).

2. Improve Transportation and Access

- Explore the feasibility of affordable and reliable transportation options to increase accessibility to farms for workers, looking to examples like [California Vanpools](#).
- In partnership with the province, develop safe cycling and walking routes to farms, especially in peri-urban or high-density agricultural zones for both the ease of access for workers, and also to promote agri-tourism.
- Partner with non-profit and senior government agencies such as the BC Ministry of Transportation and Transit to implement flexible low-cost community-based bike and ride share programs for workers (e.g. [Lower Similkameen Community Services Society Bike Share Program for seasonal workers](#), expansion of [Lime bikes/scooters](#) into farming areas).

3. Review and Reform Policy

- Align local government zoning bylaws and Agriculture Land Commission (ALC) policies to permit on-farm structures—such as worker housing and processing facilities—that support revenue diversification and ease housing shortages.

4. Support Industry Viability

- Work with the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food to support the permitting and development of post-production and value-added infrastructure for growers, via the [BC Food Hub Network](#).
- For more information on actions local governments can take to support post-production in the food system, see [Policy Brief 5 from the Okanagan Bioregion Food System Design Project – Supporting Local Post Production Sector Development](#).

Local governments can help address domestic labour challenges in the sector by supporting and encouraging the development of housing, on-farm amenities, transportation and post-production infrastructure, and addressing policy barriers for growers in BC's tree fruit and grape growing regions.

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