

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

Proposed pathways for the Provincial 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. The provincial government can:

1. Support Housing and Amenity Improvements

- Offer seasonal housing subsidies to domestic farm workers through the Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs, modeled after New Zealand's [Recognized Seasonal Employer \(RSE\) Scheme](#) which provides income support for workers undertaking seasonal jobs.
- Reinstate infrastructure grants or loans for growers to build or improve on-farm amenities such as kitchens, washrooms, and shaded rest areas, similar to the [BC COVID Safety Program](#) that reimbursed growers for infrastructure that bolstered worker safety.

- In partnership with BC Housing, support off-farm communal housing projects by partnering with local governments and industry to build seasonal or permanent facilities on public land like [BC Builds program](#) that accelerates affordable housing on public sites.
- Continue supporting the [Secrest Hill Agricultural Worker Campsite pilot \(RDOS\)](#), a seasonal housing site developed in partnership with the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen.
- Partner with local governments and industry to assist with infrastructure grants, land-use coordination, and long-term viability assessments.

2. Advance Local Education and Skill Training Opportunities

- Fund regional training and apprenticeship programs using models like [AgSkilled](#) (Australia), which partners with post-secondary programs to deliver targeted agricultural training.
- Led by the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, support regional institutions and on-farm learning initiatives like [Young Agrarians](#) (BC).
- Expand post-secondary agriculture programs in viticulture, horticulture, and sustainable agriculture modeled after programs like [Brock University's Wine Program](#), [UCD's Ag Science degree](#), and [KPU's Sustainable Agricultural Program](#).
- Partner with CAHRC, provincial ministries, and industry associations to improve orientation and safety training for new workers through standardized tools and resources. Examples include the [AgSafe HR Toolkits](#), [CASA's employee safety training](#), [BC MAF Apple Load Management Video](#), [Agri Academy's online micro-courses](#) (New Zealand).

3. Improve Transportation and Access

- In partnership with BC's Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, fund regional shuttle programs for farm workers, drawing on [California Agricultural Worker Vanpools](#), which offers subsidized group transportation to agricultural job sites.
- Partner with local government to improve active transportation infrastructure, including bike lanes, shared-use paths, and pedestrian signage, in high-density agricultural areas to support both worker access and agri-tourism.
- Partner with local governments to expand ride-share and bike-share programs in rural regions using examples like the [Lower Similkameen Community Services Society Bike Share program](#), [Go! Vermont](#), and [Shasta Living Streets Bike Share](#). Pilot programs like [Lime](#), already active in Kelowna, in nearby agricultural areas with provincial support for licensing and operational subsidies.

4. Support Worker Recruitment and Retention Efforts

- Launch youth and interprovincial recruitment campaigns through the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, Ministry of Education and Child Care, and Ministry of Agriculture, in collaboration with Destination BC and regional tourism associations. Campaigns can highlight

agricultural work as a seasonal opportunity, modeled after programs like [Pick for Britain](#) (UK), [Das Land Hilft](#) (Germany), and [HortNZ's](#) outreach.

- Offer wage top-ups and completion bonuses to domestic workers in partnership with the Federal Government, through the Ministry of Finance, modeled after [New Zealand's Seasonal Work Assistance](#) and [Australia's AgMove](#) travel support, building on the structure of BC's [Pandemic Pay Program for Essential Workers](#).
- Subsidize hiring and training costs for domestic workers, modeled after Spain's [Agricultural Employment Promotion Program](#), in partnership with the Federal Government and WorkBC, to encourage grower participation.
- Target recruitment efforts toward youth, underrepresented groups, and career switchers using models like the [Young Canadian Summer Jobs](#), and promote through schools, WorkBC centres, and regional tourism networks.
- Support workplace cultures grounded in respect and fair treatment by funding the development and distribution of HR policies, anti-harassment commitments, and team-building practices, in partnership with industry. Examples include [AgSafe's HR toolkit](#) and the [Western Forestry Contractors' anti-harassment commitments](#).
- Reform the agricultural piece-rate system to ensure all workers consistently earn minimum wage, aligned with standards introduced in [Australia's Horticulture Award standard](#).
- Develop a summer agricultural work program for youth offering tuition credits in exchange for seasonal labour, in partnership with the Federal Government, modeled after the Sport Canada [Athlete Assistance Program](#) and [BC's Youth Community Action Program](#).
- Partner with Indigenous organizations and communities and the federal government to collaboratively fund and develop training and job placement programs. Support training, certification and job matching services such as the Natural Resources Training Group's Indigenous Employment Program.
- Work with industry groups to formalize a seasonal 'work circuit' connecting agricultural work with silviculture and ski hill jobs. Co-fund a coordinator to administer, promote, and recruit workers to the program.
- Fund peer-led recruitment strategies, to be developed in partnership with industry. Formalize this recruitment stream via a pilot program with financial incentives, drawing from existing programs like the [Blue Mountain Resort Student Referral Program](#).

5. Promote Public Awareness and Advocacy

- In partnership with the federal government and industry, develop targeted educational campaigns to inform growers and workers about the economic and legal risks of undocumented labour, particularly in the event of workplace injury or labour disputes. Disseminate workshops, printed materials, and webinars through industry associations and WorkSafeBC channels.

6. Review and Reform Policy

- Along with industry, advocate for federal review of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to strengthen worker protections while supporting domestic recruitment. Explore models like [Australia's PALM scheme](#) and [New Zealand's RSE Scheme](#).

- Collaborate with the federal government to explore Employment Insurance (EI) reforms that better support agricultural workers by extending off-season benefits and reducing minimum qualifying hours.

7. Support Industry Viability

- Adapt AgriStability to support small and mixed farms, using models like [Ontario's Edible Horticulture Support Program](#), and [BC's Farm Income Assurance Act](#).
- Expand programs like [Farmland Advantage](#) and [AESI programs](#) to reward ecosystem services provided by orchard and vineyard operations.
- Boost consumer awareness of local produce by expanding Buy BC and regional branding programs, modeled after [NZ Apples & Pears](#) and [Apple Producers of Quebec](#).
- Fund regional food hubs and post-harvest infrastructure through programs like the [BC Food Hub Network](#), and revisit past cooperative processing models such as Broken Ladder Cidery.
- Along with industry, promote centralized HR and compliance tools such as [AgSafe's HR Toolkit](#) including customizable templates and checklists for employers.
- Help industry deliver practical employer training in partnership with HR professionals, offering modules on worker rights, respectful workplaces, and team management.

Strengthening BC's domestic farm workforce in support of the tree fruit and wine grape industries requires leadership from the provincial government. Immediate investments in housing, training, and transportation, paired with longer-term structural reforms such as organized workforce training and a change in the culture of work in agriculture, can shift the sector toward greater resilience. Small and medium sized growers especially need targeted support to reduce their vulnerability and reliance on temporary foreign labour. By strategic investment and program supports, the province can help increase the resilience of the sector into the future.

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