



## **Agriculture & Agri-food Canada: National Agriculture Labour Strategy Consultation**

**Written Submission from World Education Services (WES)  
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### **About WES**

WES is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and career goals in Canada and the United States. For more than 45 years, WES has set the standard of excellence in the field of international academic credential evaluation. Through WES Global Talent Bridge, the organization joins with institutional partners, community-based organizations, and policymakers to help immigrants and refugees who hold international credentials fully utilize their talents and education to achieve their academic and professional goals. Its philanthropic arm, the WES Mariam Asefa Fund, supports catalytic leaders and organizations working to build inclusive economies and to ensure that immigrants and refugees can achieve their aspirations and thrive.

### **Rejuvenating the Workforce: Developing a National Agricultural Labour Strategy (AgLS)**

WES appreciates the critical role the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food (AAFC) plays in facilitating the growth and resilience of Canada's agricultural sector. We acknowledge and share in the Ministry's goal "to develop solutions that consider unique regional and sub-sector concerns; to better position the sector to address short-term pressures and advance long-term solutions to help farmers and food processors meet their needs" (**Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food, June 2022**).

In line with AAFC's mission that focuses on leadership, sustainability, maintaining Canada's competitive position, and supporting workers and consumers alike, it is essential that the

role of (im)migrant<sup>1</sup> talent be considered and enabled. Roughly 60,000 individuals arrive as temporary residents to work in the agricultural sector **in Canada annually**, with **nearly three-quarters** of agricultural workers arriving under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. Temporary foreign workers account for nearly 20 percent of the total employment within the Agriculture and Agri-food sector (**Statistics Canada, 2020**).

WES welcomes the opportunity to provide the following recommendations to help shape the development of a sector-specific national labour strategy that will address longstanding concerns and accelerate Canada's post-pandemic economic recovery.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **I. Establish and expand existing economic immigration pathways to include a pathway to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers primarily in the agricultural sector.**

Canada's agricultural sector is the **backbone of our national food supply**, yet has suffered disproportionate impacts as a result of factors including disruptions to migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the dependence upon the **Temporary Foreign Worker (TFWP)** and **Seasonal Agricultural Worker Programs (SAWP)**, labour and production within the sector are increasingly subject to seasonality. Temporary foreign workers (TFWs) or migrant workers, represented nearly one-quarter of all agricultural

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The current format of "(im)migrant" refers to the diverse mobility pathways and statuses that newcomers hold upon arrival to Canada. The term foreign often implies *alien* or *other*. Unless being used in reference to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, WES will refrain from using terms including "foreign" that inadvertently reinforce xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and discriminatory connotations and urge all levels of government to consider this measure.<sup>1</sup>

workers in 2021 and currently represent nearly one-tenth of the total number of employees within the food and beverage manufacturing sectors (**Statistics Canada, 2020**). Growth in the demand for agricultural workers is largely driven by several factors; namely, population growth, an aging workforce, and increased economic strain facing the sector. Canada, already at risk of limited economic growth by delayed action - can no longer rely on 'band-aid' strategies to relieve pressures facing the agricultural sector and economy at large (**AAFC, 2022**). Canada should focus on expanding pathways to permanent residency for TFWs to bolster the resiliency of the agricultural and agri-food workforce; a critical step to developing long term solutions. Key steps in the development of such pathways may include:

- Amend eligibility criteria for PR status to include any in-Canada work experience
- Prioritize essential occupations and sectors that are underrepresented in current programs including agriculture, healthcare, trades, and transportation
- Gather and incorporate disaggregated data on labour market and skills gaps to facilitate timely and comprehensive policy responses in line with labour market needs
- Increase coordination between federal, provincial, and territorial ministries and additional stakeholders in agriculture, immigration, and workforce development
- Expand existing avenues including Rural Northern Immigration Pilots and renew investments in skills development training programs

## **II. Recognize and address systemic inequities faced by marginalized groups within the agricultural workforce.**

### **Design programs targeted at those experiencing the greatest negative impacts from the pandemic.**

Among women, youth, and indigenous communities in Canada, immigrants are disproportionately represented in high-risk occupations during the pandemic. Despite the critical role they play in the Canadian economy, migrant agricultural workers continue to risk longstanding systemic inequalities within their employment environments, making them one of the most vulnerable worker communities in the country (**UFCW, 2022**). As a national strategy is on the horizon, Canada must renew its commitment to ensuring that workers are treated fairly and free from **exploitative practices that infringe on their**

**wellbeing** and facilitate their health, safety, and protection of their human rights. Steps to an inclusive framework may include:

- Update terms and category designations under immigration pathways to acknowledge and address potentially xenophobic and discriminatory language (i.e. foreign vs. migrant, low-skill vs. high-skill)
- Continued consultations and convenings of occupation specific tables with additional stakeholders, namely human rights advocacy groups, and unions, and agricultural worker associations to guide the development of employment and housing protection frameworks and anti-reprisal mechanisms
- Evaluating and scaling current initiatives including the Vulnerable Worker Open Work Permit program to adequately assist workers in fleeing abusive work environments; amending the TFWP to heighten penalties to employers who have been reported for unfair treatment
- In addition to pathways to permanent residency for workers, expanding Employment Standards coverage to SAWP workers
- Gather and conduct more timely research and studies on occupation specific fatalities within the agriculture and agri-food sector.
- Implementation of mandatory training and awareness building for employers and workers on employment standards, health and safety, and workers' compensation rights
- Gathering and incorporating disaggregated data related to race, gender, age, and other intersections, towards the development of an anti-discrimination framework within the forthcoming AgLS

### **Conclusion:**

As Canada moves towards rejuvenating the agricultural sector post-pandemic, it is critical to acknowledge the contributions of international talent to the Canadian labour market and economy. A comprehensive plan would support the development of a pathway to permanent residency for temporary work permit holders and mechanisms to mitigate systemic inequities faced by vulnerable workers. WES welcomes the opportunity to engage in consultation with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, towards a sustainable and inclusive national labour strategy.

## **Appendix: Context and Challenges:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges faced by workers across a range of industries and the agricultural sector is no exception. Pandemic-induced strain on the agricultural sector underscores the need to re-evaluate the traditional categorization of workers using the low – high skills ratio, as migrant workers have, and continue to demonstrate their essentiality to the sector and greater economy. Further, global wheat shortages due to the ongoing war on Ukraine have **placed additional pressure** on Canadian agricultural production, with both Russia and Ukraine being main suppliers of wheat.

Canada’s reliance on temporary residents to fill vacancies in the sector is not a long-term solution. At its inception, **the TFWP was a strategy to attract foreign workers** to fill temporary gaps in the Canadian labour market. These labour shortages continue to widen and persist, while labour supply is still labelled as temporary. In 2016, **the gap between demand and supply for agricultural workers** stood at 59,200 people – with this figure expected to double by 2025. As of 2022, there is **an estimated annual shortfall of \$2.9B** due to labour and skills shortages in the primary-agriculture sector, with on-farm agriculture experiencing a **5.4 vacancy rate**; the highest job vacancy rate of any industry (**CFA-AFC, 2016; AAFC, 2022**). Findings from a **2021 Nanos Research Poll** indicate that nearly 80 percent of Canadians are in support of a plan to retain migrant workers in Canada. Respondents also demonstrated their appreciation of these workers and how essential they are to the sector and to keeping high-quality food accessible.

In addition to the physically demanding nature of their work, temporary residents working in the agricultural sector are also more likely to be racialized, precariously employed and housed, and often lack the social protections that can buffer them from exploitative and abusive employment policies and practices. Research conducted by the University of Alberta demonstrates that these conditions have been longstanding, as nearly 100 agricultural

workers die in occupational related accidents each year, with workers being five times more likely to be killed than employees in other sectors ([U Alberta, 2017](#)).

**Complexities wrought by the pandemic** have only exacerbated this reality ([UFCW, 2022](#)). With lockdowns in place and significant pressure facing our healthcare system, there was limited access to service provision for non-COVID related health concerns ([MWA, 2020](#)). In addition to pre-existing healthcare concerns, workers are more at risk of contracting the virus due to the communal nature of their work and living arrangements, where bunkhouses were the leading cause of farm outbreaks ([UFCW, 2022](#)). In Ontario for example, nearly 20,000 agricultural workers live in residences provided by their employers. **Despite a nearly \$35 million investment** in health and safety improvements on farms and living quarters, many **workers continue to endure substandard living and working conditions**. These facts represent realities that are direct contrasts to the obligations Canada shares as a signee of global conventions including the **United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights**, the **UN Global Compact for Migration**, and countless others, that support access to decent mobility pathways and working conditions for migrants. **The onus is on Canada** to ensure these workers are adequately protected and can thrive without fear of harm or retribution.

#### **Key Links and Resources:**

- [AAFC: Rejuvenating the Workforce](#)
- [A Review of Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program](#)
- [Canada needs to 'do better when recruiting foreign workers, federal minister says](#)
- [Cooper Institute: Safe at Work, Unsafe at Home: COVID-19 and TFWs in P.E. I](#)
- [IRCC: Racism, Discrimination, and Migrant Workers in Canada](#)
- [MWAC: Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Canada](#)
- [UFCW: The Status of Migrant Workers in Canada 2022](#)
- [We Need to End the Abuse of TFWs](#)