

Domestic Labour

In BC's Tree Fruit and Wine Grape Sectors



Institute for Sustainable Food Systems

Prepared By: KPU Institute for Sustainable Food Systems
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Project Report

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The Government of Canada, the Province of British Columbia and the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC are pleased to participate in the execution of this project. We are committed to working with our industry partners to address issues of importance to the agriculture and agri-food industry in British Columbia. Opinions expressed in this report are those of the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at KPU, and not necessarily those of the Government of Canada, Province of British Columbia, and the Investment Agriculture Foundation.

About the CCLSP

The Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project (CCLSP) is a pilot partnership of the BC Fruit Growers' Association, BC Cherry Association, BC Grapegrowers' Association, BC Wine Grape Council, and Okanagan-Kootenay Sterile Insect Release Program. The project is funded by the Government of British Columbia through programs delivered by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC. The CCLSP builds collaboration, capacity, and strategic planning across the sectors, to work on recommendations in "The Path Forward: A Blueprint for B.C.'s Tree Fruit Industry" and other priorities identified by industry.

About the ISFS

The Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) is an applied research and extension unit at Kwantlen Polytechnic University that investigates and supports regional food systems as key elements of sustainable communities. Our work is primarily focused in British Columbia but also extend to other regions. Our applied research focuses on the potential of regional food systems in terms of agriculture and food, economics, community health, policy, and environmental integrity. Our extension programming provides information and support for farmers, communities, business, policy makers, and others. Community collaboration is central to our approach.

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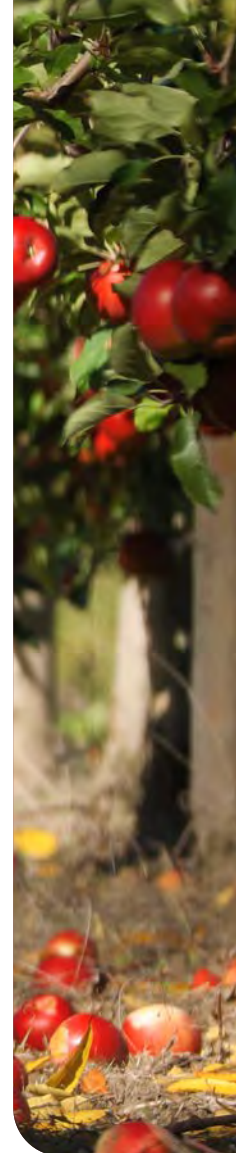
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Background

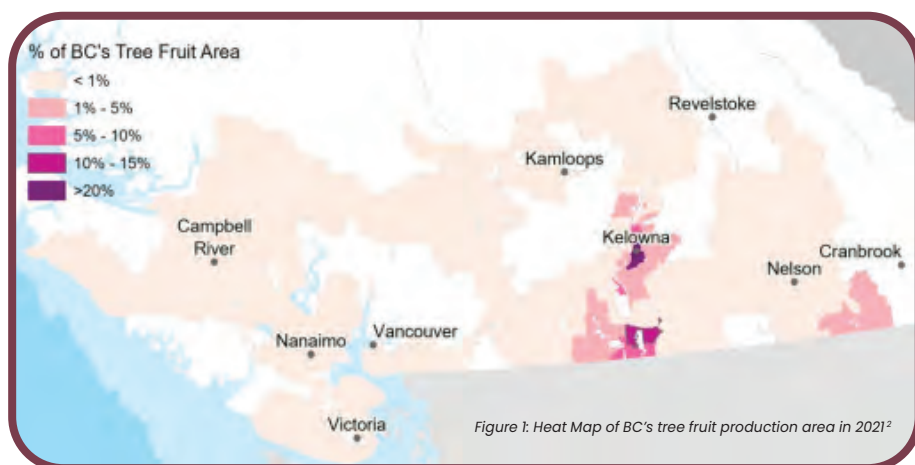
British Columbia's tree fruit and wine grape sectors play a vital role in the province's agricultural economy, cultural identity, and regional food security. However, the viability of these sectors is increasingly undermined by persistent and systemic labour challenges, particularly in the recruitment and retention of seasonal domestic workers. Reliance on the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) has grown in recent years for larger growers as a result, while the experiences and needs of domestic workers and the producers who hire them are not well-documented or understood. Despite growth in the TFWP, domestic workers remain a critical component of the labour pool for the industry, since the costs of the TFWP make it unaffordable for many small to medium scale producers (which make up a significant number of tree fruit and wine grape growers in BC). This report summarizes results from a research initiative to better understand the domestic labour landscape in BC's tree fruit and wine grape industries.

Through direct interviews with both producers and domestic workers, supported by data analysis and stakeholder collaboration, this project explores why producers pursue domestic labour, the barriers they face, and the lived experiences of workers navigating this employment landscape. The findings and recommended actions presented in this report aim to inform future labour strategies that better support both producers and workers while strengthening the overall resilience of the sector.



Industry Overview

In BC, there is a dominance of tree fruit and grape production in the north, central, and south Okanagan, Similkameen, and Creston valleys (*Figure 1*). Thus, the industry statistics presented in this section apply to these regions.¹



¹Producers in the Kootenay-Boundary Regional District and Vancouver Island were also included in the study.

²BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food. 2021 BC Tree Fruit Acreage and Maturity Report.

Tree fruit crops include apples, pears, plums and prunes, cherries, peaches, and apricots, with apples and cherries making up most of the total acreage of production (Figure 2 and Table 1).

For wine grapes, the South Okanagan holds the greatest acreage in BC (Figure 3).

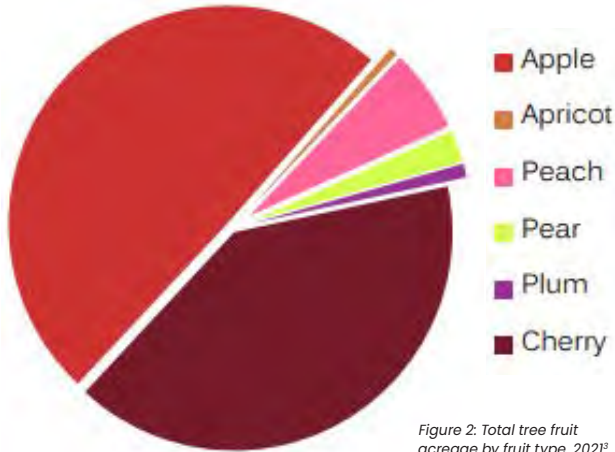


Figure 2: Total tree fruit acreage by fruit type, 2021³

FRUIT	TOTAL ACRES	PROPORTION OF TOTAL ACRES
Apple	6,312	50%
Cherry	5,137	40%
Peach	785	6%
Pear	300	2%
Plum	130	1%
Apricot	77	1%

Table 1: Total area (acres) and proportion of total area dedicated to tree fruits in BC (2021)⁴

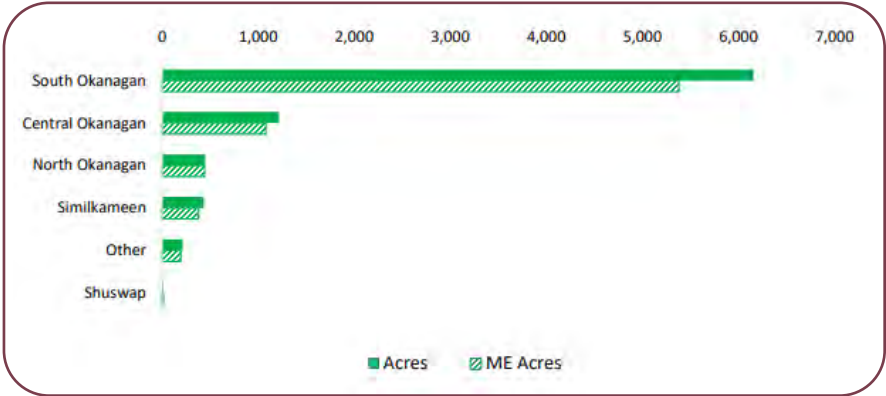


Figure 3: BC wine grape acreage by region (2021)⁵ NB: ME Acres refers to Maturity Equivalent acres which accounts for the acreage of immature plantings not yet producing at full maturity.

Over the past decade, the number of tree fruit and wine grape farms in the Okanagan has declined by an average of 8%—with the exception of the North Okanagan, which has seen notable growth of 33%.⁶

Despite fewer farms, total acreage increased by 17%, suggesting consolidation and expansion of existing operations.⁷ Today, the Okanagan is predominantly populated by small - medium scale tree fruit and wine grape farms with 90% of farms in the region measured at under 50 acres in size⁸ (Table 2).



³ BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food. 2021 BC Tree Fruit Acreage and Maturity Report.
⁴ BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food. 2021 BC Tree Fruit Acreage and Maturity Report.
⁵ BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food. 2021 BC Tree Fruit Acreage and Maturity Report.
⁶ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01 Fruits, Census of Agriculture, 2011;2021
⁷ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01 2011;2021
⁸ Statistics Canada. Custom data order REF# 5920, 2016;2021

FARM SIZE DISTRIBUTION	# OF FARMS	%
Total, all farms	1,401	100
Under 5.00 acres	338	24.1
5.00 to 9.99 acres	306	21.8
10.00 to 19.99 acres	380	27.1
20.00 to 49.99 acres	236	16.8
50.00 to 69.99 acres	42	3.0
70.00 to 129.99 acres	45	3.2
130.00 acres and over	54	3.9

Table 2: Size distribution of tree fruit and wine grape farms in the Okanagan and Kootenay–Boundary Regions.⁹

It is worth noting that although this project focused on domestic labour in the tree fruit and wine grape production sectors, adjacent sectors such as fruit packing and processing, and the wine industry are closely linked, vital to industry viability, and also significantly impacted by domestic labour challenges.

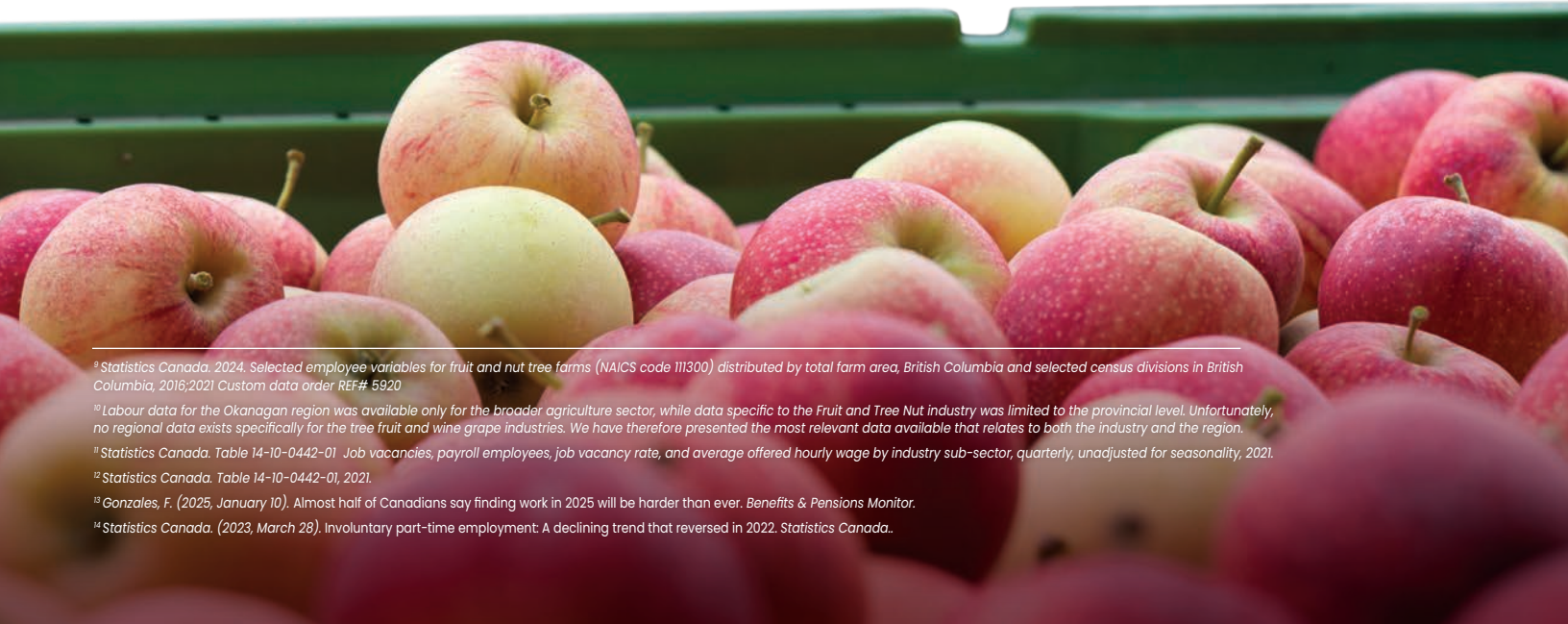
Labour Overview

Data on labour trends specific to the tree-fruit industry in the Okanagan and BC are limited; however, broader statistics on agriculture in BC and Canada help illustrate significant shifts within the sector¹⁰. Overall, agriculture in BC has seen a notable decline in its role as an employer. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of agricultural workers in the province dropped by 42.9%¹¹.

Importantly, this decline does not appear to reflect a lack of job availability. In fact, recent labour market data shows that the job vacancy rate in BC’s agriculture sector in

2024 was nearly double that of the provincial average, suggesting unmet demand for labour¹². It is possible that this mismatch may be partially explained by the seasonality of the jobs available. In recent years, Canadians have shown a preference for stable, full-time employment—nearly 75% of job seekers say they’re willing to accept full-time positions¹³, while 15% of part-time workers report being in their roles due strictly to an inability to secure full-time work¹⁴.

Work in the Okanagan tree fruit and nut farm industry is overwhelmingly seasonal.



⁹ Statistics Canada. (2024). Selected employee variables for fruit and nut tree farms (NAICS code 111300) distributed by total farm area, British Columbia and selected census divisions in British Columbia, 2016/2021 Custom data order REF# 5920

¹⁰ Labour data for the Okanagan region was available only for the broader agriculture sector, while data specific to the Fruit and Tree Nut industry was limited to the provincial level. Unfortunately, no regional data exists specifically for the tree fruit and wine grape industries. We have therefore presented the most relevant data available that relates to both the industry and the region.

¹¹ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0442-01. Job vacancies, payroll employees, job vacancy rate, and average offered hourly wage by industry sub-sector, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality, 2021.

¹² Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0442-01, 2021.

¹³ Gonzales, F. (2025, January 10). Almost half of Canadians say finding work in 2025 will be harder than ever. *Benefits & Pensions Monitor*.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. (2023, March 28). Involuntary part-time employment: A declining trend that reversed in 2022. *Statistics Canada*.

In 2021, there were 5,614 paid agricultural workers in the region and industry—4,282 (76%) of which were seasonal¹⁵. Although it is difficult to assess with certainty whether domestic workers are interested in these jobs, provincial-level data provides some insight: in 2022, nearly one-third (30%) of agricultural employers in BC reported receiving no domestic applicants for their job postings, and an additional 22% received only one or two¹⁶. This could suggest a poor fit between the nature of available roles and the employment preferences of the domestic labour force, although the seasonal nature of the work does appear to appeal to those workers who do enter and remain in the sector.

In the absence of a robust domestic labour pool, the sector has become increasingly reliant on temporary foreign workers (TFWs), that make up approximately 58%¹⁷ of the seasonal workforce in BC's tree fruit and nut industry^{18 19}. In 2021, the fruit and tree nut farming industry²⁰ alone employed 4,983 TFWs in BC^{21 22}. Of the province's 3,036 fruit and nut farms²³, 17% reported hiring at least one TFW through the TFWP^{24 25}. It's worth noting that nationally, farms with higher gross revenues are significantly more likely to rely on the TFWP, indicating a correlation between farm income and dependence on foreign labour¹⁹. This may contribute to the persistent job vacancies in BC's agriculture sector. In the Okanagan—BC's second most productive agricultural region^{26 27}—farms are predominantly small-scale²⁸ (as mentioned in the Industry Overview), with lower absolute incomes²⁹. As a result, many may be less able to access or support workers through the TFWP, and would be hit hardest by having few or no domestic applicants to fill their jobs.

Additional information on the industry and labour context can be found in Appendix A.

¹⁵ Statistics Canada. Custom data order REF# 5920, 2024.

¹⁶ Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council. (2024, March). British Columbia agriculture labour market information and forecast 2023–2030.

¹⁷ This statistic was calculated under the assumption that all TFWs are employed in a seasonal capacity.

¹⁸ Statistics Canada. Custom data order REF #5920, 2024.

¹⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01 Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry, 2021.

²⁰ This data includes berry production so is broader than the tree fruit/wine grape sectors.

²¹ Data on Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) is based on the number of annual work permits issued.

²² Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01, 2021.

²³ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0231-01 Farms classified by farm type, Census of Agriculture, 2021.

²⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01, 2021. 17% figure is derived from Statistics Canada data portraying the number of farms that employ at least one TFW in the tree fruit and nut farm industry in BC in 2021, divided by the total number of tree fruit and nut farms in BC in 2021.

²⁵ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0231-01 Farms classified by farm type, Census of Agriculture, 2021.

²⁶ British Columbia Agriculture in the Classroom Foundation. (n.d.). Thompson-Okanagan regional fact sheet [PDF]. Grow BC.

²⁷ Ministry of Agriculture and Food. (2022, December). Sector snapshot 2021: B.C. agriculture [PDF]. Government of British Columbia.

²⁸ Statistics Canada. 2024. Selected employee variables for fruit and nut tree farms (NAICS code 111300) distributed by total farm area, British Columbia and selected census divisions in British Columbia, 2016;2021 Custom data order REF# 5920.

²⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0103-01 Farm financial survey, financial structure of farms by revenue class, average per farm (gross farm revenue equal to or greater than \$25,000), 2021.





Project Overview

Methods

To better understand how tree fruit and wine grape growers in BC find and retain domestic workers, we reviewed existing industry reports and census data. We also conducted interviews to gather insights from growers and workers in the industry.

In total, 34 interviews were conducted, arranged through local industry organizations and BC Fruit Works. These conversations took place either in person or online. Workers spoke about the challenges they face and what motivates them, while growers discussed the realities of hiring and keeping staff in today's labour market. We analyzed interview data using NVivo QDA³⁰ software to uncover key themes, including what drives workers, the difficulties growers encounter, and successful recruitment and retention strategies, among others. We also gathered participant ethnicity, gender, and age data.

Participant Snapshot

Of the 34 interviewees, 22 were producers (growing wine grapes, apples, peaches, pears, plums, cherries, and apricots) and 12 were workers (including pickers, general farm labour, thinners, pruners, machine operators, and crew bosses). Many workers had experience in all aspects of farm work, and it was common to see workers employed on multiple farms throughout the season. Nearly half of the sample worked in both the wine grape and fruit tree industries, often simultaneously.

Data on farm size was also collected from producers. The number of farms operating on 0–25 acres represented the largest single category, while over half of all farms were under 50 acres, which aligns with Statistics Canada data suggesting this is the most common farm size in BC's tree-fruit industry. The interviews included producers that spanned the Okanagan bioregion, with most farming in the Okanagan–Similkameen region. Some respondents with large acreage mentioned having multiple parcels throughout the valley.

More detailed participant data, including demographics, can be found in Appendix B.

³⁰ Lumvera, Denver, CO.

What We Heard

Why Domestic Labour

The data indicates that less than a quarter (17%) of growers in BC's Fruit and Tree Nut industry make use of the TFWP^{31 32}. The remaining farms requiring additional labour (outside family labour) are likely relying on the domestic labour market; in other words, the vast majority of BC growers have a vested interest in maintaining a strong local labour pool.

The primary advantages of domestic labour identified by growers were lower transaction costs and fewer administrative hurdles. Unlike the TFWP—which requires advance planning and includes expenses like flights, housing, and transportation—hiring local workers is more straightforward and flexible. This flexibility is especially valuable in an industry where weather and crop conditions can shift unpredictably from year to year or throughout a season.

Some producers also emphasized the strength and reliability of their local teams. Those who consistently hired domestic workers described building close-knit networks: when extra help was needed, current employees often recommended others they trusted. This informal referral system helped them maintain a dependable workforce without relying on formal recruitment.

Together, these advantages show that domestic labour is not just a backup option—it plays a vital role in helping smaller farms stay agile, sustainable, and resilient in a changing agricultural landscape.

“

It has not been difficult at all. We have always hired local and we still have two people working for us that helped us plant the first grape vines in '92. And just through those people, we have continued to hire local.

– (Participant 20)

”

It should be noted however, that growers who utilized only domestic workers (such as that quoted above) and experienced few issues were in the minority. The majority using domestic labour experienced significant challenges.



³¹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01, 2021. 17% figure is derived from Statistics Canada data portraying the number of farms that employ at least one TFW in the tree fruit and nut farm industry in BC in 2021, divided by the total number of tree fruit and nut farms in BC in 2021.

³² Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0231-01, 2021.

Grower Challenges

Growers across BC's tree fruit and wine grape industries consistently identified labour as their biggest challenge. Alongside labour concerns, growers cited rising input costs, unpredictable weather, and a lack of targeted government support as persistent threats to the viability of their operations. Despite these pressures, many remain deeply connected to their land, legacy, and communities, proud of their contributions but concerned that without stronger policy support and structural reform, more farms may be forced to exit the industry.

Interviews revealed that growers in BC's tree fruit and wine grape sectors are facing mounting challenges in securing and maintaining a reliable domestic workforce. Despite this, there is a clear desire to build a more stable domestic labour force that is less vulnerable to global disruption (like the COVID pandemic or changes to immigration or work programs), requires less paperwork, planning and advanced labour forecasting. However, several persistent issues are undermining this goal. This section outlines five key challenges:

1 Poor Worker Reliability

One of the most frequently cited challenges was the reliability of seasonal domestic workers; 77% of growers reported that these workers often failed to show up, quit mid-season, didn't complete their tasks, or their quality of work was poor or inconsistent. Growers suffered anxiety throughout the season due to this challenge. Worker unreliability leads to ongoing operational disruptions and increases the administrative burden associated with repeatedly hiring and training new staff. In contrast, growers

highlighted that TFWs tend to be more unwavering in their commitment to the farm—returning season after season, demonstrating high quality work consistently, and contributing to a more stable and efficient workforce.

“

There's less and less trust that the domestic labour is going to be there, that they're going to work hard, that they're going to be respectful, and that they're going to stick around..

– (Participant 4)

”

2 Inability to Retain Workers

High turnover among domestic seasonal workers poses a significant challenge for growers, especially during critical, time-sensitive periods like harvest and pruning. Many domestic workers leave mid-season or do not return in subsequent years, forcing farms into a continuous cycle of recruitment and retraining. This disruption strains operations and adds stress and cost to growers. However, farms that succeed in retaining workers year over year exhibited a few common factors:

- Competitive wages—often in the range of \$20–25/hour or with performance-based bonuses.
- Providing on-site housing and basic amenities like kitchens, showers, lockers, and WiFi.
- Fostering a respectful, supportive work culture, where workers feel like a valued part of the team.

Other factors supporting retention include consistent work hours, opportunities to learn new skills or take on leadership roles, and shared values—like sustainability on organic farms. Collectively, these practices contribute to farms that are more resilient, productive, and attractive workplaces.

3 Lack of Skilled Workers

A shortage of both general labour and skilled or managerial staff remains a major challenge, with 77% of growers reporting labour shortages across their operations. While finding enough hands for day-to-day work is difficult, the deeper concern is the scarcity of trained, skilled workers. Growers often had to look outside local labour markets to Ontario, Europe and the U.S. to find workers with managerial or specialized skills. Growers identified the lack of *local* post-secondary or apprenticeship programs as a key factor in the small talent pool. They felt that without formal training opportunities in areas like viticulture, horticulture, or farm business management, there was no clear pathway for local workers to enter or advance in the industry.

Workers, on the other hand, highlighted the lack of on-farm training as a serious barrier to staying in agriculture long-term. Many workers enter the industry feeling unprepared and receive minimal orientation or safety training from employers. As a result, worker development stalls, and retention suffers. In short, there are few opportunities to gain skills before entering farm work—and even fewer professional development opportunities once employed in the sector—creating a cycle of

under-prepared workers and ongoing labour shortages for farms.

4 Difficulties in Recruiting Workers

Recruitment strategies in the tree fruit and wine grape industries range from formal job postings to informal word-of-mouth networks—but effectiveness varies widely. The most successful approach by far, cited by 14 of 22 growers, is word of mouth across farm networks and communities. This method tends to provide quality workers through trusted referrals. It was noted to be especially effective in close-knit communities like the Indo-Canadian community. In contrast, digital platforms (like Indeed or WorkBC), and traditional methods (such as newspaper ads) yield mixed results. Some growers were overwhelmed by unsuitable applicants with these methods, while others received no response at all. Some did find success through local Facebook groups created specifically to match workers to tree fruit growers. Some growers specifically cited the ineffectiveness of domestic recruitment as the catalyst for enrolling in the TFWP.

5 Poor Economic Viability

All growers reported feeling squeezed by economic pressures such as rising input costs—especially wages—and stagnant or declining crop returns. For example, in recent years, apple production costs have reached up to \$0.41 per pound, but the growers receive as little as \$0.12 per pound in return^{33 34}. Faced with mounting financial strain, some farms reported having to expand their operations just to stay afloat. This is a vicious cycle that ultimately undermines the viability of some farms.

³³ McNaull, S. 2022. "BC Tree Fruits to guarantee apple prices for growers". *Vernon Now*.

³⁴ Halpenny, M. 2020. "BC Fruit Growers holds 12 cent apple sale at farmers market to spread awareness on reality they are facing in the industry." *Castanet*.

Climate change worsens these challenges: deep freezes, wildfires, and droughts have destroyed crops, reduced seasonal work opportunities, and destabilized income and workforce continuity. Some producers reported losing 50–100% of their crops in a year with extreme climate events, while others faced financial losses of \$120,000³⁵ to \$300,000³⁶ annually.

Many growers worry that small, family-run farms—central to the Okanagan’s agricultural identity—are becoming unsustainable. Ultimately, economic and environmental realities are pushing growers toward a “go big or get out” model, threatening the region’s agricultural diversity, individuality, and resilience.

These challenges are interconnected and require coordinated efforts to improve sector viability, strengthen domestic labour retention strategies, and build regional supports for both training and economic resilience.

For more detailed information and interview data on grower experiences and challenges, see Appendix C.



Worker Challenges

Unpredictability and mobility define the domestic worker experience. Many travel seasonally—between eastern Canada, Quebec, Australia, New Zealand, and BC—often living in cars, tents, or makeshift camps while cycling through short-term contracts. Despite the hardships, many workers valued the flexibility, autonomy, immediate income, and sense of community they found in agricultural work. Informal networks—often via platforms like Facebook—play a key role in recruitment and peer support, frequently replacing formal hiring systems. Still, some workers expressed frustration with exploitative practices, such as unreliable or coercive intermediaries (aka crew bosses), and called for more direct hiring.

Through our interviews, we identified 5 key challenges faced by domestic workers in the sector:

1 Housing and Cost of Living

Access to housing is a major barrier for domestic workers. While some live year-round in the Okanagan, many cited the scarcity of affordable options as a key reason they couldn’t remain long-term. Employers are not required to provide housing, and high rents—exacerbated by tourist-season surge pricing—leave few viable options. The region’s living wage (\$23.69–\$25.77/hour³⁷) often exceeds what workers can earn, especially with the piece rate system, irregular hours, or weather-related crop losses.

³⁵ Participant 7.

³⁶ Participant 10.

³⁷ Living Wage BC. (2024). Living wages in BC and Canada. *Living Wage BC*. *Utilized Kelowna and Penticton data..

2 Wages and Payment

Pay in agriculture varies widely. While experienced workers on piece-rate can earn competitive wages during strong harvests, many—especially new workers—struggle to reach minimum wage. Over half of interviewed workers reported missing or delayed payments. Unpredictable wages and hours made it difficult to cover fixed costs like rent or transportation. Uncertainties in abilities to cover monthly bills made a long-term career in agriculture undesirable to some workers.

3 Working Conditions

Farm work is physically demanding, involving long hours, repetitive tasks, and frequent exposure to extreme heat, smoke, and agri-chemicals. Working conditions and infrastructure vary widely. While some employers provide communal housing/camping and facilities, many smaller or informal operations lack basic amenities such as toilets, potable water, or shelter. Some workers reported inadequate access to sanitation, shade, or personal protective equipment and safety training. Workers also reported lack of support if injured on the job. The physical toll of the work limits its sustainability as workers age. Some compared the pay unfavorably to service-sector jobs which offer similar wages under less strenuous conditions.

4 Illegal Work

Informal labour remains widespread. Some workers on tourist visas reportedly earn below legal standards—sometimes as low as \$12/hour³⁸—undermining fair wages and displacing domestic workers. This complicates employer accountability and hampers broader workforce regulation.

5 Seasonality and Sporadic Work

Agricultural work's seasonal and weather-dependent nature fuels job insecurity. Employers often give little notice, making it difficult for workers to plan schedules or rely on steady income. While some value lifestyle flexibility, others—especially older workers or those with families—seek more predictable, stable, year-round employment. Climate volatility has further disrupted harvests, exacerbating instability and likely prompting more workers to leave the sector in search of stable employment.

For further details on worker experiences and challenges, see Appendix D.

³⁸ As reported by Participants 11 and 13.



Recommendations:

The challenges facing domestic labour are multifaceted, interconnected and complex. They require actions taken by different actors, over varying time horizons. This section includes recommendations, grouped by theme. For each recommendation, we have indicated why the recommendation is needed, who could be responsible for implementation, how it could be implemented, and over what time period. In addition, we present precedents for each recommendation as examples where available. In some cases, these precedents can be applied with little change – while others may require adaptation to the BC tree fruit and wine grape industry.

Appendix E provides an overview of this information for an at-a-glance easy reference format, while Appendix F summarizes all the precedents in one location.

Housing and Worker Amenities

Rationale: Access to safe, affordable housing is a challenge identified by domestic workers. While some workers are willing to live simply while on-farm, many farms lack basic amenities. Participants noted that even modest improvements such as access to toilets, showers, refrigeration, and shade could drastically improve recruitment outcomes. One worker shared:

“

It doesn't have to be a house, just an outdoor camp with a fridge, toilet, shower, and a place to camp in the shade... I'm 90% sure you'll be able to find enough labour if you have that.

– (Participant 9)

”

Historically, local governments and community organizations operated seasonal worker campgrounds, some upgraded with provincial funds, in towns like Oliver and Keremeos. These facilities not only provided shelter but also acted as informal labour hubs. However, the status of these campgrounds has become uncertain, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and recent poor harvest years. The following recommendations aim to improve both on-farm and off-farm housing conditions, ensuring domestic agricultural workers have access to safe, dignified accommodations.



Recommendation 1

Provide direct payments to workers for housing

Description: Offer direct financial support to domestic agricultural workers to help offset housing costs, especially in regions with limited or unaffordable rental stock.

Who: Federal programs such as Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC); Provincial ministries such as the BC Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs.

How: Distribute subsidies through employment support or income assistance programs. Payments could be structured seasonally and tied to documented work placements.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)

Example Precedent:

New Zealand Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme: Worker Support Services

Under the RSE scheme, participating workers are eligible for wraparound support services including subsidized housing, relocation assistance, and bonuses for contract completion. Employers are required to provide accommodation that meets specific standards, and government funding is available to assist with costs. The program has been cited as a model for balancing worker wellbeing with labour market needs, particularly in horticulture and viticulture.

Recommendation 2

Support growers to build or upgrade on-farm amenities

Description: Support growers with financial assistance to build or improve on-farm accommodations and amenities, such as kitchens, washrooms, rest areas, and designated camping infrastructure.

Who: Federal Government programs such as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Provincial Ministry's such as the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Infrastructure, BC Ministry of Labour; Investment Agriculture Foundation (IAF); Local government planning departments.

How: Reduce regulatory hurdles in building permit process, and administer grants, low-interest loans, or cost-sharing programs through provincial agriculture or infrastructure initiatives to support basic facility upgrades.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedents:

The Canada Plan Service (CPS) (1953–1973³⁹): was a federal-provincial initiative that standardized farm-building designs aligned with national building codes. CPS offered over 200 pre-drawn plans for structures like barns and washrooms, streamlining permitting and improving building quality.

USDA Farm Labor Housing Program (Section 514/516): The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers both direct loans and grants to farm owners and non-profit organizations to develop and improve housing for agricultural workers. Projects can include construction of new facilities or renovation of existing

³⁹ Canada Department of Agriculture. (1978). Canada Plan Service: A 25-year history of service to Canadian agriculture (1953–1978). https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/aac-aafc/agrhist/A54-2-12-1978-eng.pdf

structures, including communal kitchens and hygiene areas. Housing must meet strict health and safety codes, and rents are often capped to ensure affordability.

BC Seasonal Domestic Farmworker COVID-19 Safety Program: This temporary program (2020–2021) provided BC farms with up to \$2,000 in reimbursement per worker for facility improvements that supported social distancing and sanitation, such as portable toilets, showers, and hand-washing stations. While COVID-specific, the program offers a tested administrative model that could be repurposed for more permanent improvements to worker accommodations.



Recommendation 3

Explore development of off-farm communal worker housing

Description: Explore the development of off-farm communal worker housing specifically for seasonal workers. This could include both permanent structures, and campground type accommodation.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Industry, BC Ministry of Labour, BC Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs; BC Housing; Local Government.

How: Continue to refine and support the RDOS's Agricultural Worker Campsite pilot project, while undertaking a feasibility study for more permanent built infrastructure on public land to house agricultural workers, perhaps in partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and BC Housing.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Secrest Hill Agricultural Worker's Campsite: The Regional District of Okanagan Similkameen (RDOS) assumed management of what was formerly known as the Loose Bay campground, an informal campsite that was heavily used by agricultural workers. Initial upgrades included the construction of picnic tables. This project should be monitored and adapted as necessary to provide much needed worker accommodation.

Education and Training

Rationale: Growers consistently reported difficulty finding skilled local workers—ranging from pickers and pruners to tractor operators and field managers. This labour shortage is limiting farm capacity, increasing reliance on external labour sources, and affecting long-term business sustainability. While some interviewees pointed to successful programs in other regions, there was a clear gap in accessible, regionally relevant training and support. The following recommendations aim to address these gaps by building a stronger, more skilled local workforce.

Recommendation 1

Develop funded apprenticeships and regional ag-training programs

Description: Develop regionally tailored programs offering hands-on skills and mentorship in viticulture, horticulture, and other relevant agricultural practices.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food; Young Agrarians; Local Motive; Post-Secondary Institutions; Industry Association; Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC)

How: Develop region-specific curriculum with hands-on placements; fund tuition/stipends via provincial grants or SCAP (Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership).

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Young Agrarians' Apprenticeship Program (BC): A hands-on, season-long apprenticeship that pairs new farmers with experienced mentors on ecological farms across Canada to build practical skills and regional farming knowledge.

Australia National Farmers Federation AgSkilled program (AUS): A government-funded,

industry-led training initiative in Australia that delivers free or subsidized vocational training to workers in the cotton, grains, and horticulture sectors.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Farm Schools Program (BC): A hands-on, community-based training program that teaches regenerative agriculture and business skills through immersive fieldwork and mentorship on local institutional farms.

Recommendation 2

Support the development of post-secondary programs in viticulture, agriculture and horticulture

Description: Encourage the growth of a skilled workforce by supporting the creation or expansion of post-secondary programs focused on production skills and farm business management.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food; Post-Secondary Institutions; Industry Associations; CAHRC

How: Form partnerships to co-develop curricula, provide funding or in-kind support via provincial grants or SCAP (Sustainable

Canadian Agricultural Partnership), and advocate for program establishment or enhancement.

Timeframe: long-term (5+ years)

Example Precedents:

Agricultural and Food Science Degree at the University College of Dublin (IRL): A multidisciplinary program that equips students with scientific, technical, and business knowledge to address challenges in sustainable agriculture and global food systems.

Agricultural Engineering Degree at UC Davis (USA): An engineering program that trains students to develop and apply technologies for efficient, sustainable agricultural production and resource management.

Brock University's Degree in Applied Grape and Wine Science (Ontario): A specialized program integrating viticulture, oenology, and wine business education tailored to the needs of Ontario's grape and wine industry.

KPU's Sustainable Agriculture Program (BC): Blending classroom and hands-on farm learning, the program equips students with a practical and holistic understanding of agro-ecosystem science, ecological crop production, sustainable farm business practices, and solutions to today's food system challenges.

UBC's Faculty of Land and Food Systems (BC): Interdisciplinary faculty offering a Bachelor Science in Food, Nutrition and Health which spans from the production and processing of food to its marketing, consumption, and impact on community and individual health. While not directly production focused, this program does support production-adjacent activities like post-production and processing.

Recommendation 3

Improve on-farm orientation, safety and skill training

Description: Improve first impressions of industry and domestic worker retention rates by adequately preparing workers for safe, successful, and inclusive work experiences.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour, the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food; Industry Associations; Growers; CAHRC

How: Growers can find free resources to improve orientation and on-farm training activities for new workers or for each renewed season to create a safe work environment for all workers. Industry groups or government bodies can fund or create relevant training modules and programs made freely available for growers and workers to access. If established, a labour liaison position could deliver this training to workers in the field.

Timeframe: Immediately

Example Precedents (and Resources):

AgSafe Human Resources Toolkit (BC): A comprehensive online resource that supports BC farm employers with templates and guidance on hiring, onboarding, and managing workers safely and legally.

AGSafe Training and Safety Awareness Courses (BC): A series of in-person and online courses designed to promote health and safety awareness for agricultural workers and employers in BC.

US. Agriculture Safety & Health Center's Prevention Sexual Harassment in Agriculture Training: A video developed as part of the

Center's ¡Basta! Prevent Sexual Harassment in Agriculture worksite training and toolkit designed for the agricultural workplace.

BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food's Training Video on Apple Crop Load Management: A practical, visual guide to help apple growers optimize fruit quality and yield through effective crop load management techniques.

Agri Academy (NZ Dairy): An online learning hub offering short, skills-based courses tailored to the New Zealand dairy sector's workforce development needs.

Canadian Agriculture Safety Society's Video for TFW Safety (CAN): A culturally sensitive orientation video designed to introduce temporary foreign agricultural workers to key safety practices on Canadian farms.

Canadian Agriculture Safety Courses for Employees Program (CAN): A national program offering accessible, sector-specific safety training courses to help agricultural employees reduce workplace risks.



Credit: Star Group



Transportation and Access

Rationale: Farms are spread out and in rural areas not served by public transit, or served only by sporadic public transportation that is not viable for commuting agricultural workers. Since many workers have minimal disposable income when entering the industry, they might not have their own transportation. In addition, they regularly change job sites as the season progresses to maintain their employment. As such, supporting transportation to access work opportunities is important.

Recommendation 1

Fund regional transportation supports for workers

Description: Develop affordable and reliable transit options to bring domestic workers to farms.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Transportation and Transit; BC Transit; Local Governments

How: Launch or expand vanpool/shuttle routes with seasonal government subsidies and digital coordination tools; provide subsidized transit passes to employees in areas with existing public transportation networks.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)

Example Precedents:

California Agricultural Worker Vanpools (USA): A project that funded safe, affordable and reliable vanpool transportation for agricultural workers in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Riders pay a fare which helps maintain the fleet.

AgMove (Australia): Their government offers up to \$6,000 for people who relocate for short term agricultural work. Costs related to accommodation (rent, campsite, etc.), travel costs, and work equipment are covered. Workers must travel at least 90 minutes from their current location and must not be within any metro areas, encouraging rural work. It also offers up to \$2,000 to those on work visas.

Recommendation 2

Invest in safe active transportation infrastructure to farms

Description: Improve access to farms for workers living nearby by developing safe cycling and walking routes, especially in peri-urban or high-density agricultural zones for both the ease of access for workers, but also to promote agri-tourism.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Transportation and Transit, BC Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, BC Ministry of Environment and Parks; IAF; Local Governments.

How: Identify key farm corridors within 5–10 km of population centers and invest in bike lanes, shared-use paths, and safety signage. Coordinate infrastructure development with workforce transportation planning and offer incentives to farms that support active transportation (e.g., secure bike parking, changing areas).

Timeframe: Long-term (5+ years)

Recommendation 3

Support seasonal bike-share and ride-share programs for farm workers

Description: Implement community-based bike-share and ride-share programs to improve flexible, low-cost transportation options for agricultural workers, especially in areas with limited public transit.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Transportation and Transit; NGOs; Local Governments.

How: Fund seasonal bike-share programs and support the development of mobile ride-share apps tailored to rural settings. Encourage employer-supported carpools or transportation stipends for workers who coordinate travel. Leverage existing municipal fleet or e-bike programs with farm-specific adaptations.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Go! Vermont (USA): A program run by the Vermont Agency of Transportation that helps people find transportation options including carpool matching and vanpooling for people

with common destinations. It also provides resources/incentives to encourage public transportation use or other modes of transport.

Shasta Living Streets Bike Share (USA): Provides alternative transportation options in the form of electric bikes and scooters. Users unlock vehicles by paying for a pass or paying by distance traveled. They can be dropped off in designated areas and found using the in-app map which alerts riders to the closest bike or scooter.

Lime Bikes/Scooters (Kelowna): Existing bike/scooter share program in the City of Kelowna – with adequate demand could potentially be expanded to service more rural areas.

Lower Similkameen Community Services Society Bike Share program for seasonal workers (Keremeos):

Bike lending program available to temporary foreign workers to provide free active transportation to places of work. Partnerships with local community organizations provide the upkeep and maintenance of bicycles. This program could be expanded to serve domestic workers, or a new program serving domestic workers could be established.



Worker Recruitment and Retention

Rationale: Many producers mentioned that in years past, domestic labour was sufficient to fill seasonal positions, however this is no longer the case after the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who do find local workers often cite problems with retention and reliability, exacerbated by inconsistent growing seasons and the continual search by workers for the most lucrative contracts.

“

I don't know what else to do. We try. We post jobs. I've had a tractor operator position posted for months now and got 2 resumes from Canadians and hardly anything, 1 Brit and that's it. Incredibly challenging.

– (Participant 19)

”

Recommendation 1

Establish a domestic labour liaison position to assist with worker recruitment, retention and training

Description: Re-establish a fieldworker labour liaison position to connect growers and workers, develop and deliver training for workers, and actively recruit workers through on-the-ground methods. The role could further enhance connections by also engaging post-secondary institutions, Indigenous communities and government to ensure equitable coordination.

Who: BC Fruit Works with Industry Associations; IAF

How: Create a position, potentially as a part of BC Fruit Works or associated with WALL, which focuses on collaboration within the industry and face to face engagement. Establish an Interior WALL presence to better reflect the needs of growers and workers in the region. The

candidate should be internal to the industry with the skills and experience of both a grower and a worker, have a rapport with workers, be multi-lingual, and with a good sense of agricultural business practices, regulations, and grower needs and challenges.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1-5 years)

Example Precedent:

BC Fruit Growers' Association liaison position that existed prior to the establishment of BC Fruit Works which welcomed, provided safety and orientation training, and directed domestic workers to jobs on Okanagan farms.

Recommendation 2

Launch domestic labour recruitment campaigns focused on youth and Quebecois workers

Description: National and regional campaigns to promote agricultural work as a viable and respectable employment option.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Education and Child Care; Industry Associations via BC Fruit Works; Tourism Associations (Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association (TOTA), Destination BC, Tourism Kelowna etc.)

How: Create targeted, multilingual campaigns using influencers, traditional media, and job platforms.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)

Example Precedents:

Pick for Britain (UK): Campaign aimed at recruiting domestic agricultural workers by promoting jobs as essential/vital to food security. Focused on marketing efforts, job matching, and public awareness.

Das Land Hilft (Germany): Campaign encouraging students, unemployed persons, and those laid off to fill seasonal agricultural jobs during COVID. Matched workers with those needing urgent labour.

HortNZ Seasonal Labour Campaign (New Zealand): An initiative to promote jobs and careers in the horticulture industry. Lays out career pathways in addition to providing an online ‘taster course’ with multiple offerings to get people interested in the industry.

Recommendation 3

Offer wage top-ups and completion bonuses for domestic workers

Description: Financial incentives to reward worker retention and make seasonal work more financially viable.

Who: Federal Programs and Ministries such as ESDC and the Department of Finance Canada; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Finance; Growers.

How: Administer bonuses through producers with validation of completed contracts; align with existing wage support programs.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)

Example Precedents:

Seasonal Work Assistance (New Zealand): A wage top up available to NZ residents in seasonal horticulture/viticulture work. Aimed at those who have stopped receiving benefits to go into seasonal work or have lost wages due to bad weather. Could provide wage security to workers in the Okanagan facing uncertain work/growing seasons.

AgMove (Australia): Incentive for AUS workers to move to regions that need seasonal labour. Covers accommodation, travel, and work equipment. Could attract workers from around the province/country and encourage domestic labour.

Pandemic Pay Program for Essential Workers (CAN): The Government of British Columbia, in partnership with the federal government, provided temporary pandemic pay to more than 250,000 workers, offering a payment of approximately \$4 per hour. The program was administered through employers and did not require individual workers to apply. The initiative helped retain workers in essential but lower-wage roles. A similar model could be adapted to support domestic agricultural workers by providing seasonal wage top-ups or completion bonuses administered through growers.

Recommendation 4

Provide employer subsidies to hire local workers

Description: Offset hiring and training costs for domestic workers to encourage grower participation.

Who: Federal Programs and Ministries such as ESDC and the Department of Finance Canada; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Finance.



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How: Use wage subsidies or training offset programs to reduce onboarding costs for employers hiring domestic workers.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedent:

Agricultural Employment Promotion Program (Spain): A program enacted in response to domestic labour shortages in rural regions. Provides wage subsidies and financial incentives to farmers for hiring domestic workers. The goal of the program was to reduce dependency on migrant workers.

Recommendation 5

Engage youth, underrepresented groups, and career switchers

Description: Target recruitment efforts for groups with potential for long-term engagement in agriculture.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Education and Child Care; Work BC; BC Fruit Works, School Districts; Tourism Associations (TOTA, Destination BC, Tourism Kelowna etc.)

How: Create targeted campaigns, job fairs, and entry-level training programs that promote inclusive agricultural careers.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Hire-a-Student Program (now Young Canadians Canada Summer Jobs): Anecdotal evidence from interviews suggests that in the 1980s, a targeted marketing campaign

successfully encouraged Quebec students—especially university students—to spend their summers picking fruit in BC. Flyers on campus job boards helped spark a cultural trend so strong that it became a rite of passage for Quebec youth, passed down through generations. The campaign timing, objectives, and delivery closely align with the federal Hire-a-Student program, now known as Young Canadians Canada Summer Jobs.

Recommendation 6

Prioritize positive workplace cultures grounded in respect and fair treatment

Description: Foster respectful, inclusive workplaces that prioritize worker rights and well-being through equitable practices and an established culture of care.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; BC Fruit Works; AgSafe; CAHRC; Growers.

How: Establish HR framework and policies that support worker rights, establish a farm worker association to advocate for workers, host social events, and provide other support systems for general labourer well-being.

Timeframe: Ongoing

Example Precedents:

AgSafe HR: HR toolkit includes recruitment and retention resources. Also provides HR policies to assist in onboarding and management of employees.

The Western Forestry Contractors' Association's Statement of Commitment to Improving Workplace Safety and Preventing Harassment

and Violence in Treeplanting and Other Forestry Work: a detailed strategy on building an industry that empowers professional growth while eliminating the risk of workplace harassment and violence as well as other safety hazards, particularly for women.

Lower Similkameen Community Services Society : Community led program that provides services and assistance to temporary foreign workers. Includes welcome packages, access to important services in addition to organizing social events.

Grower interviews cited the following practices that supported positive work cultures and influenced worker retention:

- Weekly staff BBQs or meals
- Daily coffee and snack breaks
- Occasional staff parties
- Post work beverages
- Gifted or discounted products for employees (eg. Wine)

Recommendation 7

Explore whole-industry extended benefits plan for workers

Description: Establish portable benefits plan (health, dental, retirement) to improve job quality and sector appeal.

Who: BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations.

How: Design health/dental/pension plans funded jointly by employers, workers, and government.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedent:

BC Agriculture Council Employee Benefits Program: A benefits program that provides medical coverage on ranches/ farms with employees. Multiple offerings for different needs but no mention of coverage for fruit tree or wine grape producers. Could expand program to be accessible to Okanagan fruit and wine industry.

Recommendation 8

Review and modify piece-rate structures to ensure minimum wage

Description: Reform piece-rate payment systems to ensure domestic workers consistently earn at least minimum wage.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; BC Employment Standards Coalition.

How: Conduct research and advocate for regulation revisions to ensure workers meet or exceed minimum wage.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Example Precedents:

BC Employment Standards Coalition Advocacy (2023): Employment standards resource which promotes progressive employment standards legislation and enforcement. Assures fair treatment, decent wages, and good working conditions. Could help in addressing wage concerns (i.e. piece rate during poor harvest, inconsistent work)

Australian Horticulture Award: Employment standards that require all horticulture employees to be paid minimum wage, even

through piece rate payment schemes. Could help in retaining new workers who often do not have the experience to make piece rate equal to minimum wage.

Recommendation 9

Create a summer agricultural work program with tuition credit incentives

Description: Develop a government-supported summer agricultural work program for youth that awards tuition credits in exchange for seasonal farm work. The program could also include training modules and certification opportunities to enhance participants' skills and employability.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC, Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA); Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, the BC Ministry of Finance; Post-Secondary Institutions

How: Design and pilot a program in partnership with Provincial Ministries and post-secondary institutions. Establish a verification system for hours worked on approved farms. Offer tuition credits or grant transfers directly to student accounts through provincial funding mechanisms. Promote the program through high schools, youth organizations, and campus career centers.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1-5 years)

Example Precedents:

Youth Community Action program: Launched in spring 2001, the Youth Community Action program, part of the Youth Options BC suite, allowing young people to earn post-secondary tuition credits at a rate of \$8 per volunteering hour. The initiative aimed to equip youth with practical skills, volunteer experience, and meaningful contributions to their communities, while reducing the cost of further education.

Sport Canada Tuition Program; The program provides direct financial support to elite Canadian athletes. The program includes a deferred tuition benefit, reimbursing eligible athletes for completed post-secondary coursework through a non-taxable allowance. This model demonstrates a tangible, government-backed precedent for combining work experience with academic incentives.

Recommendation 10

Partner with Indigenous organizations and communities for training and job placement

Description: Develop collaborative programs with Indigenous organizations and communities to support training, certification, and job-matching services tailored to agricultural employment in the Okanagan. These efforts should be co-designed with Indigenous partners to ensure that programs reflect cultural values, employment goals, and community priorities.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC, Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET); Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Indigenous Relations and



Reconciliation; BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations; CAHRC; First Nation Bands.

How: Establish working groups with Indigenous organizations to co-create training and employment pathways. Offer funding and logistical support for pre-employment training programs. Coordinate job matching and placements with local growers. Include cultural safety training for employers participating in the program.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Natural Resources Training Group's Indigenous Training Program: delivers culturally grounded, hands-on environmental and resource management training co-designed with Indigenous communities to support employment, stewardship, and self-determined capacity building.

Recommendation 11

Explore the establishment of a multi-industry seasonal “work circuit”

Description: Many orchard and vineyard workers follow the seasonal availability of work, moving from orchard work, to ski resorts in the winter, to silviculture in the spring. There is potential to formalize this into a “work circuit” with the ski tourism and silviculture industries.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; CCLSP; BC Fruit Works; Silviculture Industry Organizations; Tourism Associations (TOTA; Destination BC; Tourism Kelowna etc.)

How: Convene a working group of industry association, BC Fruit Works, silviculture industry

and ski resort/tourism industry representatives to discuss the potential. Co-fund a coordinator to administer, promote, and recruit workers to the work circuit program. Consideration would need to be given to foreign workers (who make up a significant percentage of ski resort workers) and visa requirements, along with domestic workers.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1 – 5 years)

Recommendation 12

Explore and pilot peer-led recruitment strategies

Description: A successful recruitment strategy cited by growers involved the peer-recruitment of other workers by returning domestic workers. Formalizing this stream via a pilot program with financial incentives could be of benefit.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the BC Ministry of Labour; Industry Associations; BC Fruit Works; CAHRC.

How: Seek provincial funding for a pilot program whereby returning domestic workers could receive training and small financial incentives to recruit and support additional workers throughout the season. The program could potentially be supported/coordinated by the proposed labour liaison position as well.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1 – 5 years).

Example Precedents:

Blue Mountain Resort Student Referral Program: this referral program at an Australian ski resort provides wage bonuses to employees who refer friends who are successful at securing employment with the resort.



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Public Awareness and Advocacy

Rationale: Public awareness and advocacy efforts can help build understanding of the real challenges and needs within the sector. By sharing accurate information, promoting transparency, and highlighting the essential contributions of domestic workers and growers alike, the industry can foster stronger community relationships, reduce misconceptions, and create the conditions needed for more informed policy development and program support.

Recommendation 1

Educate growers and workers on the negative impacts of undocumented labour

Description: Develop targeted education and awareness campaigns to inform growers and workers about the economic and legal consequences of relying on informal or undocumented labour, including its impacts on either party if a workplace injury were to occur.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations.

How: Facilitate workshops, webinars, and printed materials that address legal risks. Highlight how informal labour can create coverage issues if someone gets injured on the job. Partner with community-based organizations to deliver information in multiple languages.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Recommendation 2

Advocate for improved worker accommodations and access to funding

Description: Promote sector-wide advocacy for improved on-farm housing standards and increased access to public and industry funding to support basic infrastructure for domestic workers.

Who: BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations.

How: Engage with municipal and provincial governments to address permitting barriers, zoning restrictions, and funding limitations. Compile case studies to demonstrate the business and workforce benefits of improved amenities.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Recommendation 3

Advocate for BC Fruit Works as a permanent industry initiative

Description: Establish BC Fruit Works as a formalized, year-round coordinating body responsible for domestic labour recruitment, data collection, and industry training support.

Who: Industry Associations.

How: Engage the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food to secure long-term operational funding. Position BC Fruit Works as a workforce strategy hub responsible for implementing research-backed recommendations, coordinating outreach, and building regional partnerships.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Recommendation 4

Conduct grower audit to inform outreach and HR support

Description: Collect and analyze grower data to better understand the challenges and gaps in workforce management, housing provision, and recruitment strategies.

Who: CCLSP; BC Fruit Works; Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (KPU ISFS); CAHRC.

How: Design and implement a structured survey and/or interviews to gather information on current practices and challenges. Use results to tailor industry supports, improve communication, and advocate for relevant policy or program changes.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)



Policy Reform

Rationale: Several growers expressed concern that the current Temporary Foreign Worker Program, while essential, may inadvertently reduce attention and investment in local labour development. At the same time, both workers and employers highlighted housing as a critical pressure point—domestic workers struggle to find affordable options, while growers face regulatory and financial challenges in providing accommodations. These policy recommendations reflect opportunities to better align federal labour programs with local workforce needs and to streamline housing-related regulations across jurisdictions to ease pressure on growers and improve worker conditions.

Recommendation 1

Advocate for review and reform of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program

Description: Improve protections for TFWs while ensuring the program supports rather than undermines domestic recruitment. Explore legislation that would allow workers to work across multiple farms as part of the TFWP.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; Industry Associations.

How: Participate in consultations and submit evidence-based proposals to better align the TFWP with domestic priorities.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme (AUS): The PALM scheme permits approved agricultural employers, including labour hire companies, to bring in workers from the Pacific Island, once proven there is not enough local labour available, and deploy workers across multiple farms and regions, offering flexibility to address seasonal labour demands.

Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme (NZ): The RSE scheme allows seasonal horticulture or viticulture workers from the

Pacific Islands to be hired once employers prove a genuine effort to recruit local workers has been made. The program allows workers to transfer between different employers and regions within New Zealand, provided there is mutual agreement and approval from Immigration New Zealand, enhancing adaptability for both workers and employers.

Recommendation 2

Review and explore alignment or discrepancies between local government policies and Agriculture Land Commission regulations for farms

Description: Although Agriculture Land Commission (ALC) policy takes precedence over local government regulations, there are inconsistencies and a lack of clarity that can be difficult for growers to navigate. Undertake a thorough examination of ALC policies as they relate to local government policies in the Okanagan (most likely with respect to worker housing or additional farm development) to identify necessary local policy amendments that align with ALC.

Who: Provincial Agricultural Land Commission (ALC); CCLSP; Local Governments; KPU ISFS; Planning Institute of BC (PIBC).

How: Researchers retrieve relevant local government policies and ALC policies and analyze for congruency or discrepancy

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

ALC policy-guiding resources are available and targeted to local governments.

CCLSP recently undertook related work by facilitating local government agriculture tours for local government, First Nations, planning staff, producers, industry associations, and the province to share perspectives and discuss challenges and opportunities related to local and provincial agricultural policies and regulations.

Recommendation 3

Review and reform existing working visa extension requirements

Description: A policy that allows working visa holders to extend their stay by continuing employment in the agricultural sector may help in recruiting foreign labour outside of the TFW program. Such policy would recognize the struggle faced by small-scale growers in recruiting labour and may fill the gap left by the TFW program on smaller operations.

Who: Federal Government Programs such as ESDC, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA).

How: Advocate for a review of the working visa program to include an option to extend by completing employment in the agricultural sector.

Timeframe: Medium to Long-term (3–7 years)

Example Precedent:

Australia Working Holiday VISA Extension: Those on a working holiday VISA may apply to extend their stay in the country by working in specified sectors, including agriculture. Applicants must work for at least 88 days in order to apply and can even extend for a third year by repeating the process.

Recommendation 4

Explore changes to Employment Insurance benefits for agricultural workers

Description: Extending the eligible benefit period for farm workers could attract more workers to the sector as they would be assured of income in the off-season. Also, considering a lower minimum qualifying hours requirement for farm workers could also be attractive to workers.

Who: Federal Programs such as ESDC, DoFC; Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; CCLSP

How: Review of the federal EI program to increase benefits for agricultural workers.

Timeframe: Medium to Long-term (3–7 years)



Support for Industry Viability

Growers face an extremely challenging economic climate, particularly in apples. As costs of production rise while returns stagnate, profitability goes down and many growers struggle to remain viable. 75% of growers indicated that they would pay their workers more if they received more for their products, so while not specifically addressing labour issues, the following recommendations serve to bolster overall industry viability, with the hope of positive impacts on labour issues.

Recommendation 1

Reform and adapt Business Risk Management programs (including AgriStability) to better support small/diverse farms

Growers referenced issues with existing BRM programs, which tend to favour large scale, single-crop farms, leaving smaller, diversified farmers at a disadvantage when crops fail.

Description: Modify existing AgriStability parameters to address barriers faced by small-scale and diversified farms, such as whole-farm calculations and revenue thresholds.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food; BCAC; CAHRC

How: Consult growers and pilot adapted BRM models with simplified criteria for small/mixed farms.

Timeframe: Medium to Long-term (3–7 years)

Example Precedents:

Agri-Stability (Canada): AgriStability operates as a margin-based program. It compares a producer's current year product margin to a historical reference margin. If the current margin falls more than 30% below the reference margin, the program covers 80% of the loss beyond that threshold.

Edible Horticulture Support Program (Ontario)

Provides financial support to small and medium sized agricultural operations producing eligible crops. It helps farms adjust to increased costs they may experience as a result of circumstances out of their control.

BC Farm Income Assurance Act

Intended to stabilize farm income by addressing the unpredictable nature of farm work. Financial peaks of years with good returns would be used to fill in the years of bad returns.

Recommendation 2

Explore Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) specifically for orchards/vineyards

Description: Compensate growers for providing ecological benefits (pollinator habitat, soil health, biodiversity).

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Energy and Climate Solutions; IAF; Conservation NGO's.

How: Expand Farmland Advantage to include orchard-specific metrics; support monitoring and reporting systems.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedents:

The Farmland Advantage Program (BC): Targets at-risk ecosystems in BC and compensates farmers for undertaking ecological mitigations on these lands. A program like this could be developed with the dual goals of improving tree fruit and wine grape industry viability as well as sensitive habitat protection.

Agri-Ecosystem Stewardship Initiative – IAF: Supports on-farm ecological goods and services which were previously funded by the farmland advantage program. AESI helps farmers identify the natural values on a farm that can be protected, restored, and enhanced and develops recommendations and plans to preserve them.

Recommendation 3

Support and expand Buy BC/ local branding initiatives

Description: Boost consumer awareness and grower participation in regional branding to improve market competitiveness. Connecting the consumer with the producer can also promote pride in production for growers.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport; Tourism Associations (TOTA; Destination BC; Tourism Kelowna etc.).

How: Offer grants for brand adoption and partner with retail chains for label placement and co-marketing.

Timeframe: Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Buy BC, Grow BC, Feed BC: Encourages and

increases the use of BC grown products by promoting their use in government facilities (Hospitals, schools, etc.). Provides a marketing program that boosts awareness, demand, and sales of BC products (agriculture, food, beverage).

Apple Producers of Quebec & NZ Apples & Pears Inc.: Organizations that promote their product and comprise of partnerships of orchards/farms in the industry. The Quebec program even offers online sales of product. Large hub of information available about their industries and initiatives.

Recommendation 4

Improve post-production and value-added supports

Description: Expand regional infrastructure for sorting, processing, and packaging to reduce crop loss and boost farm profitability.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, BC Ministry of Labour; IAF.

How: Fund shared-use post-harvest infrastructure and provide training in processing and value-added skills. Expand and deepen the BC Food hub network.

Timeframe: Medium-term (2–5 years)

Example Precedents:

Broken Ladder Cidery (BC Tree fruits) – now closed – recommend case study of lessons learned

BC Food Hub Network: Consists of 13 commercial food processing hubs. They support local economic growth and provide

jobs by providing shared-use infrastructure, equipment and services. Expands local food processing capacity and allows smaller producers to access such services.

Recommendation 5

Develop HR, legal, compliance and training resources for employers

Description: Equip farm operators with centralized guidance on employment standards, compliance, and best practices.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; BC Fruit Works; CAHRC

How: Create centralized templates, guidance documents, and self-assessment tools tailored to small/mid-sized farm operations.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)

Example Precedents: AgSafe HR: Ag Safe is currently implementing HR consulting to help agriculture employers creating HR policies for their businesses. Consultants assist with recruitment, onboarding, and employee management.

Recommendation 6

Recommendation 6: Develop training workshops on workforce management

Description: Provide employer training in HR practices, worker retention, and respectful management.

Who: Provincial Ministries such as the BC Ministry of Labour; BC Fruit Works; CAHRC

How: Partner with HR professionals to deliver practical workshops and online modules for growers.

Timeframe: Short-term (1–3 years)

Example Precedents: AgSafe HR resources



Important Considerations:

In implementing the above recommendations, a few important considerations are warranted:

Language barriers and barriers to digital access

First, many growers come from various ethnic backgrounds and may not speak English as a first language, if at all, as is the case for many south Asian growers. At the same time, given the rising age of growers, many may not be digitally literate and may find many online resources inaccessible. As such, any job matching tools, training materials or supports should also be available in multiple languages and through non-digital formats like phone-based or printed materials.

Definition of “domestic worker”

In this project, we have operated under the assumption that “domestic workers” were workers who were Canadian citizens or permanent residents, but there are grey areas and groups of potential workers including refugee claimants and workers on open permits. Clarity on who is eligible for various programs will be necessary during implementation, and a consistent, agreed-upon definition across the industry will be important.



Conclusion

Growers in British Columbia's tree fruit and wine grape industries face mounting difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified domestic workers. At the same time, their operations are under significant economic pressure with rising costs and often, diminishing returns. Domestic workers in the sectors contend with difficult working conditions, low wages, and limited access to safe, affordable housing—challenges exacerbated by their unpredictable incomes. The end result is a labour market that is not working for employer or employee. The reasons behind these labour challenges are complex and interconnected, necessitating simultaneous and wide-ranging, actionable solutions by many different actors. This report and the accompanying appendices have documented the challenges in detail and suggested several actions. Although there is no single action that will solve the complex challenges in the sector, there are actions that can be taken immediately—actions that can lay the foundation for significant, long-term change and for which growers and the industry already have the tools to drive meaningful transformation.

For growers who want to build a stronger domestic workforce, change can begin with simple, practical steps such as investing in positive workplace environments, strengthening safety protocols, and using available resources to improve training. These actions, when taken collectively, have the potential to shift the culture of the sector and improve its image as a viable and reputable source of employment for future generations.

Industry associations can help amplify this shift by sharing these messages, developing and promoting accessible training materials, advocating for aligned policy, and fostering education pathways to build a local workforce. But most importantly, they can lead by keeping communication open and encouraging collaboration across the sector.

Local governments can play a role in addressing housing issues, and senior levels of government can provide financial supports and implement programs to address some of the challenges including wage subsidies, housing programs, and transportation, while reducing policy barriers. Maintaining and strengthening the supports for industry to support sector viability is also critical for senior governments.

The tree fruit and wine grape industries are not homogenous – in BC there are many small growers that are reliant on domestic labour and are making their operations work despite the challenges. However, there are also fewer, but larger farming operations who bear a greater share of the agricultural economy and for whom domestic labour is not practical. This dichotomy makes addressing the domestic labour situation in the province difficult and is worthy of consideration and discussion within the industry.

The future of the industry depends on what happens next. Based on grower and worker feedback, it is clear that continuing with the status quo is not an option. A more viable labour future is possible—but it will require growers, industry groups, government, educational institutions, and consumers to innovate, to be creative, and to come together around a shared vision.



Domestic Labour

In BC's Tree Fruit and Wine Grape Sectors



Institute for Sustainable Food Systems

Prepared By: KPU Institute for Sustainable Food Systems
Prepared For: Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project

July 3, 2025
Appendices

Funding Acknowledgment

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The Government of Canada, the Province of British Columbia and the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC are pleased to participate in the execution of this project. We are committed to working with our industry partners to address issues of importance to the agriculture and agri-food industry in British Columbia. Opinions expressed in this report are those of the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at KPU, and not necessarily those of the Government of Canada, Province of British Columbia, and the Investment Agriculture Foundation.

About the CCLSP

The Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project (CCLSP) is a pilot partnership of the BC Fruit Growers' Association, BC Cherry Association, BC Grapegrowers' Association, BC Wine Grape Council, and Okanagan-Kootenay Sterile Insect Release Program. The project is funded by the Government of British Columbia through programs delivered by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC. The CCLSP builds collaboration, capacity, and strategic planning across the sectors, to work on recommendations in "The Path Forward: A Blueprint for B.C.'s Tree Fruit Industry" and other priorities identified by industry.

About the ISFS

The Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) is an applied research and extension unit at Kwantlen Polytechnic University that investigates and supports regional food systems as key elements of sustainable communities. Our work is primarily focused in British Columbia but also extend to other regions. Our applied research focuses on the potential of regional food systems in terms of agriculture and food, economics, community health, policy, and environmental integrity. Our extension programming provides information and support for farmers, communities, business, policy makers, and others. Community collaboration is central to our approach.

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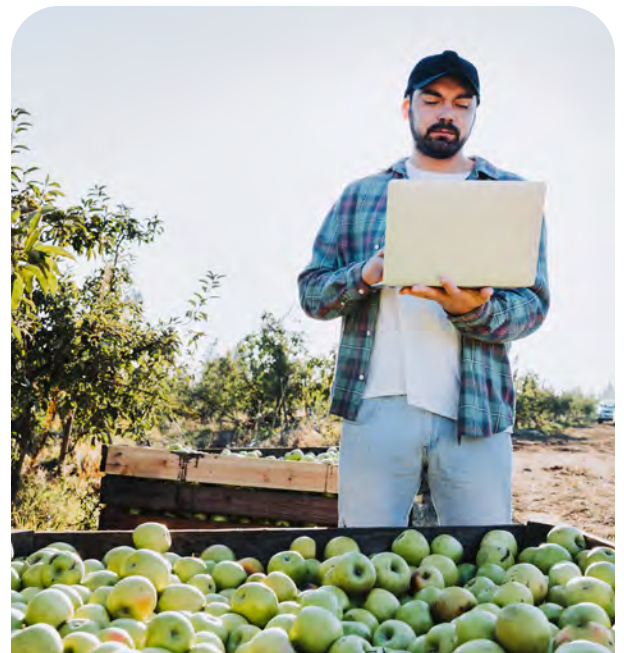


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Appendix A: Tree Fruit and Wine Grape Industry Profile and Labour Data

Size of Industry

The Okanagan Valley accounts for over 40% of the total fruit acreage in British Columbia¹. This includes a diverse range of tree fruits such as apples (27.4%), pears (1.4%), plums and prunes (1.2%), sweet cherries (21.1%), sour cherries (0.5%), peaches (4.2%), and apricots (0.6%)². Additionally, the region cultivates a significant proportion of the province's grapes, accounting for 40.2% of the total acreage.³

In 2021, the farm gate values of fresh fruits marketed in British Columbia were as follows⁴:

- Apples: \$56,380,000
- Apricots: \$1,295,000
- Sour cherries: \$518,000
- Sweet cherries: \$84,717,000
- Grapes: \$74,748,000
- Nectarines: \$1,744,000
- Peaches: \$8,868,000
- Pears: \$5,947,000
- Plums and prune plums: \$2,108,000

Ten Year Trend

Total number of farms

Between 2011 and 2021, the total number of farms reporting tree fruit and grape crops in the Okanagan Valley decreased by 7.9%⁵. The most significant decline occurred in the Okanagan-Similkameen, where the number of farms dropped by 14.5%⁶. The Central Okanagan experienced a smaller reduction of 4.4%, in contrast, the North Okanagan demonstrated notable growth, with a 33.1% increase in the number of farms reporting these crops⁷.

Among the various crops, the most significant decreases in farm reporting were apricots (-24.1%), sweet cherries (-18.1%), and pears (-17.6%)⁸. Sour cherries were the only crop that saw an increase in farm reporting, with a significant growth of 46.2%¹⁰.

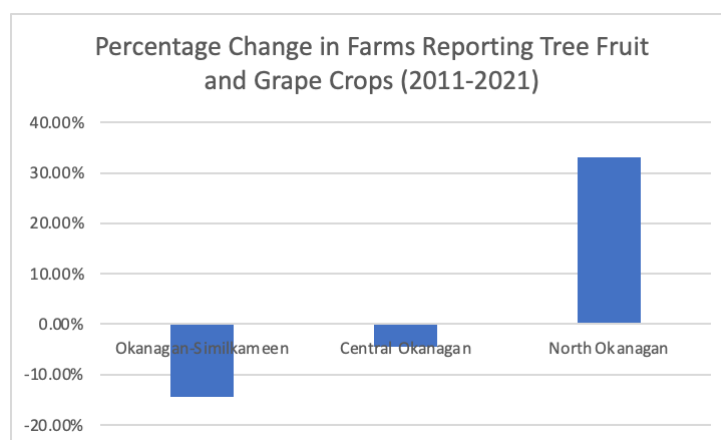


Figure 1: Percentage of Change in Farms Reporting Tree Fruit and Grape Crops (2011-2021)⁹

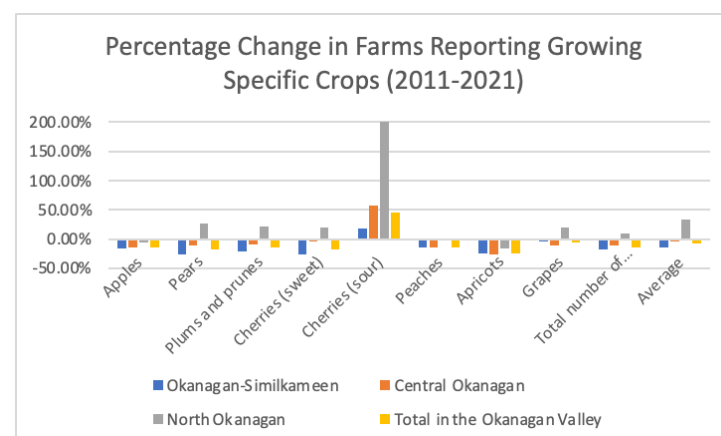


Figure 2: Percentage of Change in Farms Reporting Growing Specific Crops (2011-2021)¹¹

¹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01 Fruits, Census of Agriculture, 2021.

² Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2021

³ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2021

⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2021

⁵ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01 Fruits, Census of Agriculture, 2011;2016;2021

⁶ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

⁷ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

⁸ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹⁰ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹¹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

Total Acreage

Despite the decline in the number of farms, the total acreage of tree fruits and grapes in the OV saw a 16.9% increase between 2011 and 2021. It is important to note, however, that the quality of the data related to the acreage of specific tree fruits and grapes in the North Okanagan was not considered sufficiently reliable, and as such, has been omitted from this analysis.

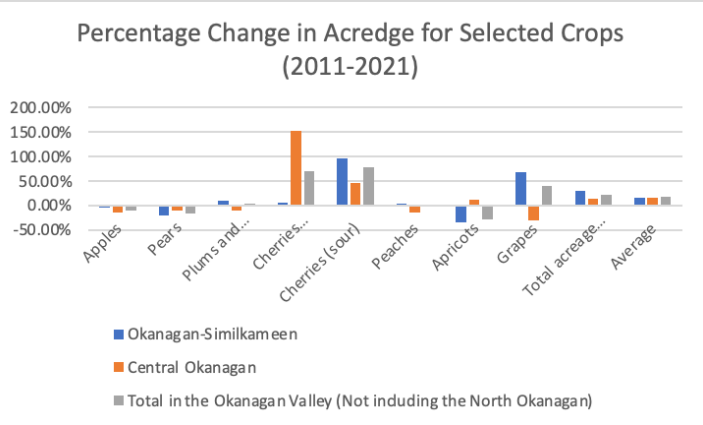


Figure 3: Percentage Change in Acreage for Selected Crops (2011-2021)¹³

The Central Okanagan led in terms of acreage growth, with a 16.8% increase, followed closely by the Okanagan-Similkameen, which saw an increase of 15.4%¹⁴. Specific crops showing the most substantial increases in acreage include sour cherries (+77.3%), sweet cherries (+70.0%), and grapes (+40.7%)¹⁵. Conversely, decreases were observed in apricots (-29.2%), pears (-17.1%), and apples (-10.0%)¹⁶.

Labour Profile

Employment Demographics

According to Statistics Canada, in 2023, the agricultural sector in British Columbia employed approximately 25,400 individuals¹⁷. Of those employed, 18.5% were between the ages of 15 and 24, 41.7% were aged 24 to 54, and 39.4% were 55 years or older¹⁸.

Age Distribution in the BC Agricultural Sector (2023)

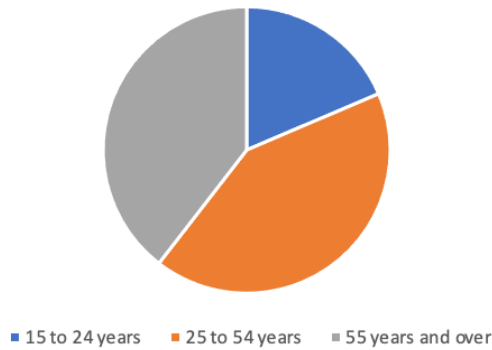


Figure 4: Age Distribution in the BC Agricultural Workforce¹⁹

In terms of gender, 52.4% of the workforce identified as male, while 47.6% identified as female²⁰.

Regional Distribution

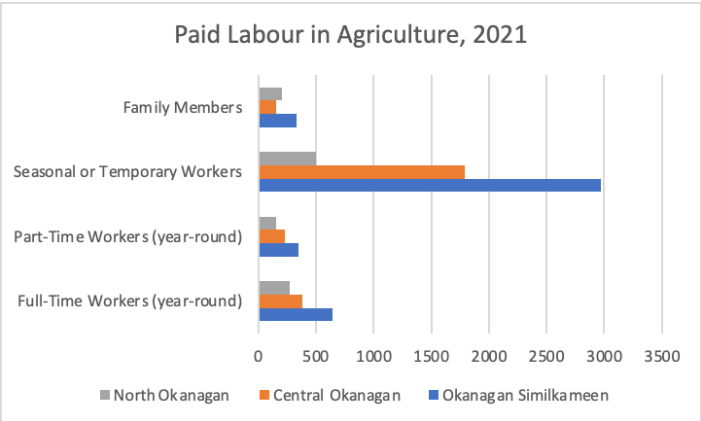


Figure 5: Paid Labour in Agriculture, 2021²³

The Okanagan Valley had a total of 7,287 paid agricultural workers. Of this total, 54.5% were employed in Okanagan-Similkameen, 32.9% in the Central Okanagan, and 12.6% in the North Okanagan. In terms of employment types, the Okanagan Valley had 1,288 full-time year-round agricultural workers, with 49.9% located in Okanagan-Similkameen, 29.3% in the Central Okanagan, and 20.7% in the North Okanagan²⁴. Additionally, there were 727 part-time year-round workers, with 47.9% in Okanagan-Similkameen, 31.4% in the Central Okanagan, and 20.8% in the North Okanagan²⁵. Seasonal or temporary workers (including TFW's) accounted for 5,272 positions, with 56.6% employed in Okanagan-Similkameen, 34.0% in the Central Okanagan, and 9.4% in the North Okanagan²⁶. Temporary foreign workers (TFWs), that make up approximately 58% of the seasonal workforce in BC's tree fruit and nut industry^{28 29}.

¹² Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹³ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹⁵ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹⁶ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0315-01, 2011;2021

¹⁷ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01 Labour force characteristics by industry, annual (x 1,000), 2024

¹⁸ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01, 2024

¹⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01, 2024

²⁰ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01, 2024

²¹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0243-01 Paid labour, Census of Agriculture, 2021

²² Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0243-01, 2021

²³ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0243-01, 2021

²⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0243-01, 2021

²⁵ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0243-01, 2021

²⁶ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0243-01, 2021

²⁷ This statistic was calculated under the assumption that all TFWs are employed in a seasonal capacity

²⁸ Statistics Canada. Custom data order REF #5920, 2024

²⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01 Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry, 2021

In 2021, the fruit and tree nut farming industry³⁰ alone employed 4,983 TFWs in BC^{31 32}. Of the province's 3,036 fruit and nut farms³³, 17% reported hiring at least one employee through the TFWP^{34 35}.

TFWs in Agriculture

In 2021, the Fruit and Tree Nut farming industry in Canada employed 12,249 Temporary Foreign Workers³⁶. Of this total, 4,983 TFWs were employed in British Columbia³⁷.

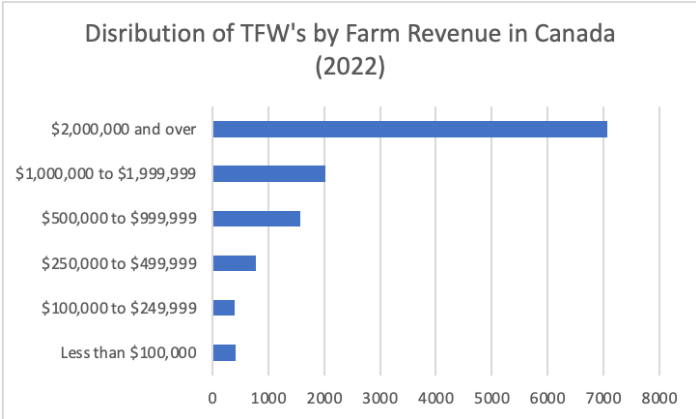


Figure 6: Distribution of TFWs by Farm Revenue in Canada, 2021³⁸

Nationally, 3.4% of TFWs worked on farms with revenues under \$100,000, 3.2% on farms with revenues between \$100,000 and \$249,999, and 6.4% on farms with revenues between \$250,000 and \$499,999³⁹. Meanwhile, 12.9% worked on farms with revenues between \$500,000 and \$999,999, 16.5% on farms with revenues between \$1,000,000 and \$1,999,999, and 57.7% on farms with revenues exceeding \$2,000,000⁴⁰.

Job Market

In the context of crop production employment, there were an average of 17,747 payroll employees between the first quarter of 2023 and the second quarter of 2024⁴¹. During this same period, the sector experienced an average of 1,377 job vacancies, resulting in a job vacancy rate of 7.42%⁴². This figure is notably higher than the provincial job vacancy rate, which stood at 4.5% during the same timeframe⁴³. The average offered hourly wage in crop production was \$18.61, which compares to the provincial minimum wage of \$17.40 an hour⁴⁴.

³⁰ This data includes berry production so is broader than the tree fruit/wine grape sectors
³¹ Data on Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) is based on the number of annual work permits issued
³² Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01 Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry, 2021
³³ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0231-01 Farms classified by farm type, Census of Agriculture, 2021
³⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01 Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry, 2021. 17% figure is derived from Statistics Canada data portraying the number of farms that employ at least one TFW in the tree fruit and nut farm industry in BC in 2021, divided by the total number of tree fruit and nut farms in BC in 2021
³⁵ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0231-01 Farms classified by farm type, Census of Agriculture, 2021
³⁶ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01 Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry, 2021
³⁷ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0218-01, 2021
³⁸ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0220-01 Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture sector, by category of farm revenue, 2021
³⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0220-01, 2021
⁴⁰ Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0220-01, 2021
⁴¹ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0442-01 Job vacancies, payroll employees, job vacancy rate, and average offered hourly wage by industry sub-sector, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality, 2024
⁴² Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0442-01, 2024
⁴³ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0442-01, 2024
⁴⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0442-01, 2024

Appendix B: Participant Demographic Data

We interviewed 22 growers and 12 workers for this project. Figure 1 illustrates the participant breakdown across the tree fruit and wine grape sectors.

	PRODUCERS	WORKERS
Wine Grape	12	3
Tree Fruit	5	3
Both	5	6
Total	22	12

Figure 1: Participant breakdown

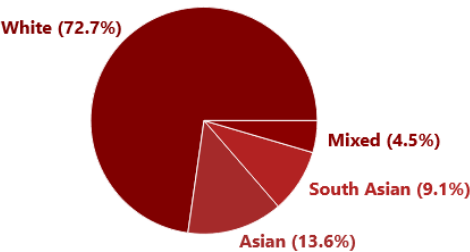
Figure 2 illustrates the ethnic composition of survey participants. Those who self-identified as white represented nearly three quarters of all respondents. Asian, South Asian and Mixed ancestry represented over a quarter of interviewees. The producers interviewed largely self-identified as female or male, with one respondent identifying as other. The 45-65 range represents the largest single category nearly making up half of total respondents. Half of all producers interviewed identified themselves as under 45 while only two responses were gathered by those past retirement age of 65.



Figure 4: Age distribution of producers.

Producer Demographics

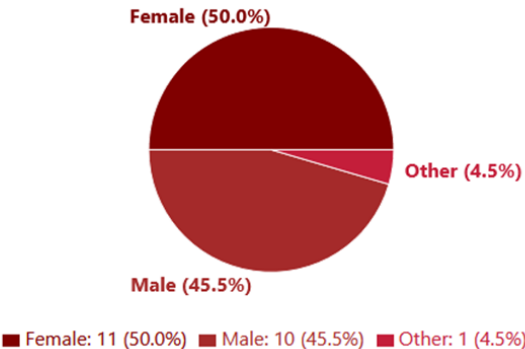
Ethnicity Distribution (n=22)



■ White: 16 (72.7%) ■ Asian: 3 (13.6%) ■ South Asian: 2 (9.1%) ■ Mixed: 1 (4.5%)

Figure 2: Ethnic distribution of producers.

Gender Distribution (n=22)



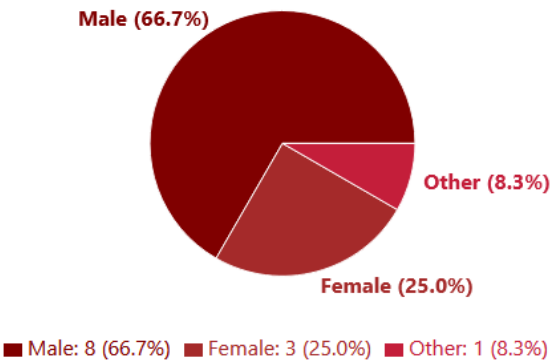
■ Female: 11 (50.0%) ■ Male: 10 (45.5%) ■ Other: 1 (4.5%)

Figure 3: Gender distribution of producers.

Worker demographics

Two thirds of the workers interviewed self-identified as male. Female and those who identified as other constituted the other third of worker responses. 75% of workers interviewed identified as under 35 while only 3 respondents were over the age 35.

Gender Distribution (n=12)



■ Male: 8 (66.7%) ■ Female: 3 (25.0%) ■ Other: 1 (8.3%)

Figure 5: Gender distribution of workers.

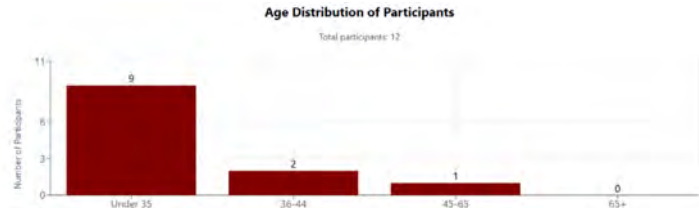


Figure 6: Age distribution of workers.

Farm acreage distribution

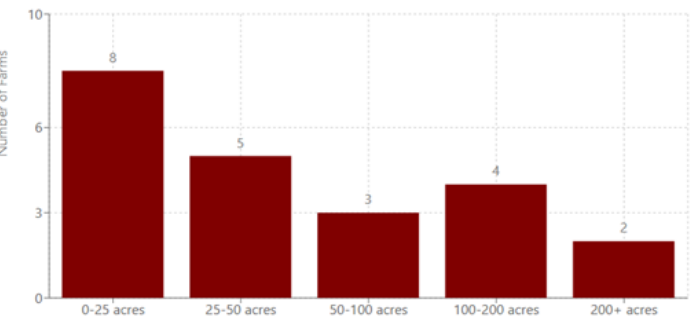


Figure 7: Farm acreage distribution.

The number of farms operating on 0-25 acres represents the largest single category while under 50 acres makes over half of respondents. This highlights the prevalence and importance of smaller farms in the region, correlating with Statistics Canada data which suggests this is the most common farm size in BC’s tree fruit industry. Responses gathered span farms of all sizes emphasize a diverse agricultural industry in the Okanagan.

Geographic distribution

The study interviewed producers throughout the Okanagan, with a large majority of responses from the Okanagan-Similkameen region. Some respondents mentioned having farms throughout the valley. Although the focus of the study is the Okanagan region, one producer’s response was gathered outside of the study region. No responses were gathered from the North Okanagan.

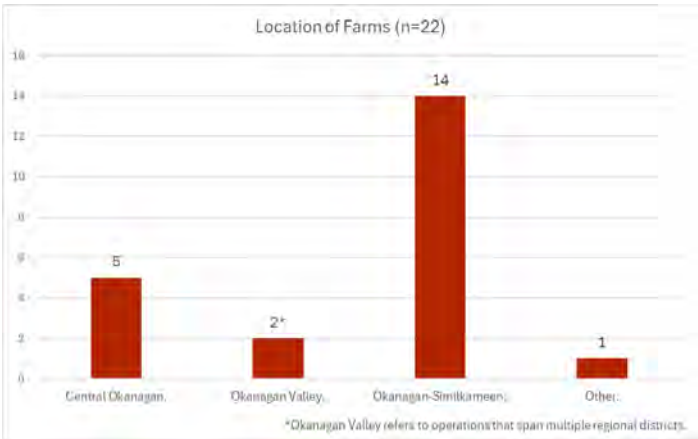


Figure 8: Geographic distribution of producers interviewed.



Appendix C:

Grower Experience & Challenges

This document outlines the operational experiences and challenges of BC's tree fruit and wine grape growers, based on analysis of interview responses collected for this research project.

Grower Profile

The growers participating in this research cultivate a diverse range of wine grape and tree fruit crops, including apples, peaches, pears, plums, grapes, apricots, nectarines, and cherries. Their experience in the industry varies widely, from new farm owners with just a year of operation to seasoned producers with up to 50 years of experience. On average, most have been running their farms for approximately 15 years. Some are first-generation farm owners, while others continue a legacy as second- or third-generation producers.

Labour Market Landscape

Temporary Foreign Worker Program

Securing and retaining labourers is one of the most pressing issues for the growers interviewed. Many rely on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), particularly larger farms (often those with at least 25 acres), as they find the domestic labour market unreliable. Growers overwhelmingly agree that TFWs provide a more dependable workforce with a strong work ethic, while domestic labourers often come and go, making staffing unpredictable. Some growers have had production suffer due to a reliance on erratic domestic workers but saw improvements when they switched to the TFWP.

Despite the benefits, the cost and administrative burden of hiring TFWs present major challenges. Housing, flights, and paperwork create financial and logistical strain, and the need to apply for labour before the growing season begins adds an element of risk and therefore, a desire to have a local or domestic labour pool remains amongst BC growers.

Domestic Labour Realities

Growers reported significant difficulty in hiring and retaining qualified domestic workers, especially for general farm labour roles such as thinning, pruning, canopy management, and harvesting. While some domestic workers—particularly in the grape and wine industry—demonstrate passion for the job and long-term commitment, many lack experience or consistency. In the past, hiring students, particularly from Quebec,

was a viable option, but that trend has sharply declined. Growers recruit domestic workers through the use of Facebook and often target ski hill workers, and tree planter networks, though many find their greatest success comes from word of mouth when they pay well and treat their employees fairly.

Other Sources

In addition to direct hiring, some growers work with vineyard management companies and crew bosses to help meet labour demands. Illegal workers, including individuals on tourist visas or TFWs seeking extra hours, also make up a small but notable (although undocumented) part of the labour force. Family labour remains a crucial component for many smaller-scale producers.

Key Labour Challenges for Growers

Analysis of the interview responses revealed several key challenges that limit growers' ability to depend on domestic labour as a sustainable option for their farm operations.

1 Poor Worker Reliability

Overwhelmingly, when asked about the challenges they face in employing seasonal domestic labour, growers identified issues with reliability of domestic workers as compared to temporary foreign workers. Seventy-seven percent of growers cited issues with domestic labour not showing up or reliably completing work, or leaving partway through the season, necessitating additional hiring and training on behalf of the grower.

Additionally, beyond simply showing up, there was emphasis placed on the superior work ethic of workers from the TFWP. Growers that hired from the TFWP felt that they could also rely on the quality and pace of work they were going to get day after day, while the same sentiment was not shared about domestic workers. Growers noted perceived differences in reliability between domestic and foreign workers, often attributing this to differing motivations. They felt that TFWP workers, who often return annually, were highly committed to the work, motivated by the opportunity to support their families back home. In contrast, some domestic workers—particularly students from Quebec—were seen as prioritizing the broader experience of spending a summer in BC, with flexible farm work as a secondary benefit. As a result, they were perceived as less focused on building long-term ties to the industry.

Growers also acknowledged that some of the commitment to stay reliably on the same farm was circumstantial. TFWP employees are unable to hop between farms, due to regulatory constraints, while domestic workers are more free to “shop around” and bounce between farms, finding jobs that have more desirable work or wages.

“

There’s less and less trust that the domestic labour is going to be there and that they’re going to work hard and that they’re going to be respectful and that they’re going to stick around.

– (Participant 4)

”

“

Sometimes people come, they start the job, we give them training, they waste our couple weeks, then they quit.

– (Participant 6)

”

“

If I go back 10 years, the reason I brought in foreign workers is because I couldn’t depend on accessing Canadian workers.

– (Participant 10)

”

2 Inability to Retain Workers

Reliability ties in significantly with growers’ inability to retain domestic employees. Many workers move between farms mid-season, often leaving just as they are needed most for critical, time-sensitive tasks like harvesting or pruning. This unpredictability makes it difficult for growers to plan and allocate labour effectively, leading to disruptions in farm operations and uncertainty in meeting harvest demands. Additionally, the ever-changing workforce means growers often face a new pool of workers each year, forcing farmers to invest significant time and resources into recruiting, hiring, training, and managing new staff annually. This cycle of high turnover causes significant stress, production inefficiencies, and resources to be wasted, ultimately hindering business productivity and profitability.

How We Identified Retention Insights

To better understand what helps growers retain workers, we asked each grower whether they had been successful in keeping employees year over year. Their answers were then compared with key business practices—like wages, housing, amenities, and job type—using a simple cross-tabulation approach. This revealed patterns and common strategies among growers who were more successful at retaining staff.

Our analysis revealed three primary factors that contribute to successfully retaining workers year over year:

Competitive Wages

Competitive wages and bonus structures play a crucial role in retaining a steady workforce. Farms offering above-minimum wage (\$20–\$25/hour) – even when compared to slightly above minimum wage (\$18–\$19/hour) – experienced increased worker retention. Some growers experienced successful worker retention by implementing piece-rate systems with additional incentives. This payment policy took a variety of forms: some growers provided minimum wage to all workers while also adding a small per-bin rate for pickers to incentivize work rate; others offered increasing piece rate with subsequent bin production (ie. Bins 1–3 received \$22/bin, bins 4–6 received \$26/bin, etc.).

Bonus System

Some growers experienced worker retention when they provided some form of bonus system. Bonuses were for workers that returned from previous years, or for those that remained for the entirety of the season or

for a predetermined number of days. Growers found success with the bonus model in retaining workers for a whole season – an issue often brought up regarding the domestic labour force – and also in the retention of workers year over year. In contrast, farms that only offer minimum wage or lack incentive programs tend to struggle with retention, as workers seek better-paying opportunities elsewhere.

Housing and Amenities

The availability of housing and workplace amenities also significantly impacts retention. Farms that provide on-site housing—whether through permanent structures, trailer hookups, or campsite spaces—generally retain workers more effectively. In some cases, growers deduct housing costs from wages, and some reimburse these costs through end of season bonuses, creating a win-win situation for both employer and employee.

Whether housing options are offered or not, workers place a very high value on additional amenities available on site – such as kitchens, bathrooms, lockers, WiFi, running water, and communal spaces. Farms with these amenities report better worker satisfaction and greater worker retention.

Additionally, workers identified that these amenities on site add to the feeling that workers are humans with needs and rights, and treated with respect, rather than just “machines” available for farm operations. However, maintaining these amenities requires financial investment for the growers – in purchasing, installation, maintenance and repairs. Some farmers have found that hiring property managers to protect and care for amenities, or implementing small housing fees have helped to reduce or offset maintenance costs.

Workplace Culture

A positive workplace culture centered on respect, fairness, and communication is another key factor in worker retention. Many growers attribute their ability to retain workers to fostering a “family-like” environment, promoting transparency in pay, and ensuring open communication with employees. Workers placed a high emphasis on a “family-like” or “team” culture and agreed that they were more likely to return for subsequent seasons on farms that fostered that culture.

Some farms go beyond fair treatment by offering additional benefits such as meals, daily coffee, BBQ’s, staff gatherings, and even medical coverage, further strengthening worker loyalty. Growers find that clearly defining their desired workplace culture and ensuring that managers embody it helps create an environment where seasonal workers feel valued and respected. Conversely, farms that do not actively cultivate a supportive culture or prioritize worker well-being tend to experience higher turnover rates.

Other Retention Strategies

Farms that provide consistent work hours throughout the season, rather than unpredictable schedules, report higher retention. Opportunities for career advancement—such as promotions to supervisory roles or training opportunities (eg. for tractor operators)—help keep workers engaged and invested in long-term employment. Additionally, some farms benefit from aligning their values with workers’ interests; for example, organic farms often retain workers who are passionate about sustainability, or vineyards appeal to those interested in wine and wine production more broadly. Lastly, farms known for treating workers well gain reputational advantages, as employees recommend jobs to friends and family, easing recruitment efforts.

3 Lack of Skilled Workers

Across interviews with both growers and workers, the shortage of skilled domestic labour emerged as a widespread and persistent concern. While 77% of growers identified a general lack of workers as a central issue, many emphasized that the scarcity of skilled and managerial-level domestic workers is especially acute. Participants described this not only as a current barrier to productivity and business viability, but also as a growing challenge with no obvious local solution.

Many growers reported that it was nearly impossible to find local candidates with the training or experience necessary for skilled roles, such as vineyard management, equipment operation, or supervising crews. Several growers explained that they often had to look outside the province—sometimes to Ontario, the U.S., or Europe—to find workers with the appropriate qualifications. The lack of skilled applicants from within BC was repeatedly attributed to a broader absence of accessible, local training and education opportunities. Some growers noted that while occasional short courses or workshops exist, these are often one-off offerings with limited reach and no clear pathway toward advancement. Some expressed frustration that while places like Ontario have post-secondary viticulture and oenology programs, nothing comparable exists in BC. This gap was seen by several growers as a key reason why so few young people pursue skilled or long-term work in agriculture locally.

Growers discussed their own capacity to train the workforce. They highlighted the importance of on-farm training but expressed concern over the time and cost required to train new staff each season—especially when turnover was high. Some growers noted that it can take around three years for a worker to become confident and productive enough to require little oversight. They described the ongoing need for training as a major drain on resources and a source of operational inefficiency, especially when few workers stayed long enough to justify the investment. Many growers spoke about the value of investing in training managerial staff, noting that good

supervisors could set the tone for the whole workforce—reinforcing safety, maintaining productivity, and helping to retain workers. However, most growers said that finding skilled local managers was even more difficult than recruiting for general farm labour.

Workers repeatedly emphasized that the presence of on-farm training significantly influenced whether they felt competent, safe, and respected in their roles and had many experiences on farms where they felt this was lacking. Workers identified adequate on-farm training in safety protocols and skill building as critical to their satisfaction and likelihood of remaining in the industry. Some described leaving farms or knowing of other who left the industry entirely after poor initial training experiences. By contrast, workers who felt supported in learning and growing on the job were more likely to stay on longer and come back the next year. This suggests that on-farm training may be informing a pattern currently contributing to a cycle of high turnover and resulting in a less skilled and less prepared workforce overall.

“It was so hard to find someone who is qualified and reliable, right? And you know, we went through three or four cycles of advertising... and there really wasn't anyone domestically available.”

– (Participant 1)

4 Difficulties in Recruiting Workers

Recruitment strategies within the tree fruit and wine grape industry reflect a diverse range of informal to formal methods. When asked, 14 of the 22 participants cited word of mouth as their most successful recruitment tool. Word of mouth appears to operate through farm-to-farm networks, current and returning employee referrals, and community connections. Word of mouth is also highly effective in certain communities such as the Indo-Canadian community.

Just over a third of the farmers interviewed mentioned using digital or traditional advertising to gather employees. This included posting on job boards (Indeed, WorkBC, newspaper) and social media pages. Overall, farmers had varying results with some saying they received many applications and some saying the opposite. Social media pages, like Facebook pages

dedicated to connecting workers and growers, appeared to be the most consistently successful approach outside word of mouth, but not always considered a reliable source when labour needs are imminent. Based on the scope of this project we were unable to determine why some marketing campaigns were successful while others were not.

“There would need to be more people that show up. I mean, we get 150+ applicants and, none of them show up for an interview. I think they all put it on their paperwork that they've applied for a job, and they get their EI, and they don't actually come, like they don't actually make it to an interview.”

– (Participant 3)

“I don't know what else to do. We try. We post jobs. I've had a tractor operator position posted for months now and got 2 resumes from Canadians and hardly anything, 1 Brit and that's it. Incredibly challenging.”

– (Participant 19)

5 Poor Economic Viability of Industry

In recent years, agriculture has been, and is increasingly struggling to be economically viable. Apple growers in particular have struggled to obtain sufficient and predictable returns for their crop. Costs of production have increased while returns have stagnated or decreased over time, for example, between 2016 and 2020, costs of production were \$0.34–\$0.41/lb, but the return to growers only \$0.12–\$0.26/lb.^{45 46 47} Participant 10, who recently removed acres of apples, stated that in the last ten years they've received the same price per bin of apples, while input costs have gone up by 80%. In other tree fruit crops, returns may be better, but the margins are still slim.

⁴⁵ Halpenny, M. 2020. BC Fruit Growers holds 12 cent apple sale at farmers market to spread awareness on reality they are facing in the industry.

⁴⁶ McNaull, S. 2022. “BC Tree Fruits to guarantee apple prices for growers”. Vernon Now.

⁴⁷ Ference & Company Consulting. 2021. “Development of an Apple Marketing Commission”. Prepared for the New Tree Fruit Varieties Development Council.

While the declining economic viability of BC's tree fruit and wine grape sectors has been extensively reported and analyzed—such as in the BC Wine Grape Council's commissioned report *An Opportunities Assessment for the BC Grape and Wine Industry*, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food's *The Path Forward: A Blueprint for B.C.'s Tree Fruit Industry*—this analysis draws directly from interviews with growers themselves. By centering the voices and lived experiences of growers working on the ground in 2024, we were able to validate, expand upon, and deepen understanding of the key factors impacting their bottom lines.

Contributing factors:

a. Climate Challenges:

Climate change is having detrimental effects on the Okanagan's tree fruit and wine grape industries. The effects of climate change have not only caused crop loss, but also labour market disruptions, financial and mental health strains, and overall uncertainty.

Many producers reported significant losses due to extreme weather events including deep freezes, extreme heat events, droughts, and wildfires. Entire vineyards and orchards have been affected, with one producer losing 80–90% of their crop. The deep freeze in the 2023–2024 season devastated apple, cherry, and soft tree fruits, leading to widespread removals of affected crops. Some people have attempted to replant their crops, but the future of those crops and operations remains uncertain. Extreme heat events have caused low yields and have caused long term damage to crops, particularly with cherries, while wildfire smoke and drought have affected grapevine health. Additionally, many respondents have noted that climate unpredictability has made it difficult to plan for the future.

“We have to guess what our season is going to look like without actually having any consistency in seasons any more.”
– (Participant 2)

The unpredictable, and often low yield seasons have reduced the need for seasonal labour, as fewer crops mean fewer workers are required. Some farms have cut their workforce in half, while others did not hire at all.

One producer explained:

“Because of the crop failure, we didn't know if we were going to need anybody, so I didn't advertise.”
– (Participant 17)

Due to the lack of work, many workers have sought jobs in different industries, raising concerns about what the labour market will look like if conditions improve. Some producers who secured foreign workers before weather events lowered their crop yield have struggled to provide them with work while still fulfilling their contract obligations.

The economic impact of climate related crop impacts has been felt deeply by both producers and workers. Producers that were interviewed reported losing up to \$300K⁴⁸ annually, with smaller farms struggling to stay afloat. Some producers express concern over the viability of the industry, particularly the apple industry, citing oversupply and declining market value. Additionally, climate instability has exacerbated financial stress, with some producers returning to second jobs to supplement their income. Participants also brought up the mental health crisis amongst farmers who are facing extreme financial and emotional strain due to repeated climate events and an uncertain future, saying:

“I'm very concerned with the mental health of farmers... A lot has changed. Some farmers lost everything.”
– (Participant 10)

⁴⁸ Participant 10

Some producers are exploring crop diversification in response to climate change, with some shifting to more resilient crops. However, high replanting costs and long establishment periods make this transition difficult. As one producer explained:

Many producers worry that the industry is becoming less sustainable with the prevalence of industrialization and small-scale farms struggling to compete.

Overall, climate change has destabilized agriculture, creating a cycle of financial hardships, labour shortages, and mental health challenges. The unpredictability of extreme weather events makes long-term planning nearly impossible, leaving many uncertain about the future of their operations and livelihoods.

b. High Costs of Labour

The Okanagan tree fruit and wine grape industries are facing increasing economic pressures, where rising labour costs threaten the viability of many operations. Through the responses from the participants of the study, a consistent theme emerges—where increasing wages in combination with stagnant crop prices, lead to even further financial constraints. The growing disparity between wages and revenue not only represents a temporary challenge, but a potential threat to the structure of the industry.

While wages have risen substantially, mostly driven by minimum wage requirements, the prices farmers receive for their product have stayed the same. With the exception of wine and alcohol-based revenues, prices for soft fruit have stagnated. Participant 10 explains:

“Our apples, we get paid about the same price we got paid 10 years ago and our wages have gone from 11 to \$17.40 plus benefits.”
– (Participant 10)

While all industries face the challenges of inflation, the agricultural industry in the Okanagan confronts dramatic differences between input costs and market prices.

The large disparity between returns and labour costs creates a need for farmers to consolidate or grow. High wages push many farmers to the more costly TFWP, leaving smaller operations behind. These small operations must face a seemingly impossible situation where the costs of regulatory compliance and labour management cannot be sustained by their production scale. As one participant stated, farms have:

“...gotten bigger out of necessity... it’s so expensive to pay people and to follow all of the rules and all of the housing that you have to get bigger and bigger, or you have to get out.”
– (Participant 4)

Small and family-based farms are important to the Okanagan’s identity, outlining the need to address these labour issues.

The impact of these economic pressures has created concern among producers. Many of those interviewed expressed worry about their ability to continue their operations under these conditions:

“It always comes back to revenue. You have to be able to sell your product and enough of it to hire more people... Unless you can pull more in, you just have to do more with less.”
– (Participant 28)

“These are businesses that are very strapped for cash and they’ve been hurting for years. And so it’s a very tricky time to be discussing anything that has to do with the most expensive part of their business, which is the human capital..”
– (Participant 15)

These accounts highlight operational challenges and the economic disconnect between farm returns and labour costs. It threatens the structure of the Okanagan tree fruit and wine grape industry and as such, it is important to find a path to address issues to support these farmers.

Though agriculture across the country is a difficult industry, and particularly for small scale producers, some growers also pointed out that the region they're producing in is particularly expensive. The cost of living is high in the Okanagan due to its desirability, and like any region with a heavy tourist influx, prices for everything are high. Participant 20 said :

“

And to be honest with you, I can't think of a crop that we could grow here and make a decent living.

– (Participant 20)

”

Go Big or Get Out

Several growers (7) referenced the challenges with economic viability of farming in the sector, and the need to expand their operations to remain competitive and to generate enough revenue to support the increasing costs of labour and production, or to cease farming altogether.

“

we realized that either we had to go big or get out.

– (Participant 4)

”

However, when farm size increases, growers have greater difficulty finding adequate domestic labour to meet their needs and so most opt to participate in the TFWP. Indeed, many larger farms stated that they could not currently operate without this program. With this program however comes increased costs of housing, transportation etc., necessitating still higher revenues to afford these new labour expenses. Some growers identified their scale as “in the middle” which created disadvantages in not being able to hire enough domestic workers but being unable to afford the TFWP .

Other growers highlighted the fact that mechanizing increases efficiency and therefore the ability to pay people more for specialized work (eg. Tractor operators) which was seen as a benefit. However, given the diverse and varied geographic terrain of the Okanagan region, mechanization, consolidation and expansion is not feasible throughout.

Two workers also spoke of their experience in regions with larger-scale farms or vineyards (like Australia) and how the larger scale of operation necessitated and lent itself to greater organization and therefore a smoother

experience for workers, whereas the smaller, more diverse patchwork of Okanagan farms makes this challenging. However, one worker did note the seeming trend toward larger farms in the Okanagan and noted that in their experience, these larger farms had poorer amenities and work culture, making them less appealing as employers.

Participants noted that it was unfortunate that growth was necessary because:

“

The only way you can do it is to be part of a corporation... and people that want to be farmers don't want to be part of a corporation.

– (Participant 4)

”

There was a sense of worry about consolidation leading to a “loss of charm and individualism” that currently defines the Okanagan industry. Still other growers raised the issue of challenges faced by diversified smaller-scale farms in accessing support programs (like Agri-Stability) that have been tailored to larger scale enterprises usually farming one or two crops.



Key Industry Challenges

Beyond labour shortages, growers face several broader industry concerns. The aging workforce, rising input costs, and climate unpredictability are considered some of the more pressing issues with the longevity and prosperity of the industry as a whole. Many feel that governmental resources and support for the industry are lacking, adding to the financial and operational strain of running a farm.

Despite these challenges, growers continue to adapt, using creative recruitment strategies, diversifying their crops, and leveraging both family and external labour to maintain production. For many, the tree fruit industry is more than just a business—it's a livelihood rooted in resilience and a deep connection to the land and carries on important family legacies. Most growers are very proud of their operations and contribution to their communities but they worry about the future of their operations and the industry more broadly. It is general consensus that stark changes are needed, either in policy, government supports or education to improve viability, to prevent continued farm decline.

Spotlight: A Human-Scaled Approach to Viability

One grower stood out for using a unique trellis system to grow grapes—designed for high yields per acre but not compatible with mechanization. As a result, the operation relies entirely on domestic labour and has achieved remarkable long-term worker retention, with some employees returning annually since the 1990s.

Because the system requires hand labour throughout the season, the grower is able to offer steady employment across multiple months—a key factor in both recruitment and retention. This model demonstrates how labour-intensive, human-scaled agriculture can support both economic viability and workforce stability. Given that much of the Okanagan is poorly suited to mechanization due to small parcel sizes and topography, further cost analyses could explore the broader economic and social benefits of similar approaches across the region.



Appendix D: Domestic Worker Experience in the Industry

This Appendix outlines the experiences, motivations and challenges of workers in BC's tree fruit and wine grape industry, based on the analysis of interview responses collected for this research project.

Overview

Domestic agricultural workers in the Okanagan Valley, many that return year after year, describe a labour landscape shaped by mobility, informality, and precarity. Several key themes emerged during the interviews with workers that allowed insights into their working and living conditions, motivations, and ongoing challenges. Unpredictability and mobility are central features of many workers lives. Participants described a lifestyle shaped by seasonal migration, living in cars, tents, and makeshift camps, and constantly shifting between contracts. While some have managed to find year-round housing or transition into more stable roles, many others remain caught in cycles of temporary work and housing insecurity. This instability is exacerbated by the scarcity of affordable accommodation, which workers identified as a barrier to remaining in the region long-term.

Despite these challenges, many workers highlighted the flexibility, autonomy, and sense of community they found in agricultural work. Several participants described the appeal of being outdoors, working independently, and forming community with fellow workers. Informal networks play a key role in recruitment and support, with platforms like Facebook often replacing formal systems. However, some workers voiced frustration with exploitative practices, such as unfair crew bosses, and emphasized the need for more direct hiring practices.

Finally, participants shared a desire for structural change, particularly around worker housing, wage enforcement, and employer accountability. Several workers advocated for better government oversight, while others emphasized the role of education, both for employers in understanding best practices, and for workers in knowing their rights and managing their finances.

Worker Motivation

Workers in the Okanagan's agricultural sector are driven by a range of motivations, including financial incentives, lifestyle flexibility, connection to nature, sense of community, and cultural experiences. Understanding these factors is essential for developing strategies to attract and retain domestic labour in the industry.

While wages in agriculture are often cited as a challenge,

the ability to earn quick income remains a significant factor for many workers. The seasonal nature of the work allows individuals to secure short-term employment without long-term commitments, making it an appealing option for those seeking immediate earnings. Despite the potential for higher wages in other industries, some workers prioritize the accessibility and straightforward nature of agricultural employment.

Many workers are drawn to agriculture due to the flexibility it offers. Seasonal employment allows for intensive work periods followed by extended time off, providing opportunities for travel, personal pursuits, or other short-term jobs. The independent work environment is also appealing, with some workers valuing autonomy, varied daily tasks, and limited direct supervision. The ability to balance work with personal freedom makes agricultural labour an attractive option for those seeking non-traditional employment structures. For some, working in agriculture provides a meaningful connection to the land. The opportunity to work outdoors, experience changing seasons, and engage in physically active tasks contributes to job satisfaction. Individuals with agricultural backgrounds often view this work as an extension of their upbringing, reinforcing a strong work ethic and sense of purpose.

The social aspect of agricultural work is a key motivator for many individuals. Workers often develop strong relationships with their coworkers and employers, fostering a sense of belonging that encourages them to return each season. The familiarity of working in the same location year after year creates a community-oriented work environment, sometimes outweighing financial considerations in their decision to continue in the industry. Many workers mentioned that a strong work culture where the workers and growers "feel like family" or create a feeling of "community" creates for a very appealing work environment, more likely to attract and retain workers in the industry. One worker put it simply:

“

We were like a small family going back, it was nice and my employers were such nice people. I wanted to go back and work for them even though some years I could make more money at other places, but I was like, you know...I'll still stick to the family.

– (Participant 34)

”

For some workers, particularly those from Quebec, agricultural employment in the Okanagan represents a cultural tradition and a formative experience. Many see it as a rite of passage, providing personal growth, independence, and the opportunity to live and work in a new environment. This cultural significance adds depth to their participation, making it more than just a job but an important life experience.

Agricultural work in the Okanagan is influenced by a diverse set of motivations beyond financial necessity. The combination of flexibility, outdoor work, social connections, and cultural significance makes this sector appealing to a wide range of workers. Recognizing these motivations is critical for shaping policies and employment strategies that can strengthen the domestic agricultural workforce.

Key Worker Challenges

Analysis of interview responses revealed several key barriers limiting workers' ability to enter and stay in the tree fruit and wine grape industry, and to see it as a viable long-term career.

1 Housing and Cost of Living

The high and increasing cost of living and housing in the Okanagan was the most frequently cited challenge. 17 of 22 producers (77%) and 12/13 workers (92%) mentioned housing as an issue, making it the top issue for workers and growers alike.

Unlike Temporary Foreign Workers, who are provided with accommodation as part of the agreement with their employer, employers are under no obligation to provide housing for domestic workers. The living wage in 2024 was \$24.99/hour in Penticton and \$25.77/hour in Kelowna in 2024⁴⁹. Compared to the average wage range of \$15–\$25/hour earned by domestic agricultural workers, it is clear that there is a significant gap, which is only set to increase with rising costs of groceries, tariffs etc. Historically, farm workers would often camp in the orchards/vineyards where they were working (in vehicles, tents or RV's), and this still occurs, although some workers mentioned this was no longer allowed on some farms and finding affordable places to camp was difficult.

Still others mentioned that often camping and living facilities were inadequate or lacking, while others felt that if basic camping amenities were provided, retention of workers would increase significantly:

“It doesn't have to be a house, just an outdoor camp with a fridge, toilet, shower, and a place to camp in the shade... I'm 90% sure you'll be able to find enough labour if you have that.”

– (Participant 9)

In some cases, campgrounds have been operated by local governments and upgraded with provincial funds to provide clean and safe accommodations for local agricultural workers, however the long-term tenure of one such site in Oliver remains uncertain. Several workers did reference having stayed in this campground in years past, and another referenced a previous similar situation in Keremeos. These central campgrounds also historically served as recruitment centres in past years, where farmers could just show up and negotiate with workers on the spot day by day. Anecdotal reports are that since COVID and with the multiple poor crops in recent years, these campgrounds were almost empty in the 2024 summer season.

Growers acknowledged the difficulty for workers in finding housing in the Okanagan during the growing season (which overlaps with the busy tourist season in the region), and difficulty affording the high cost of living in the Okanagan for those that lack year-round employment. One worker mentioned needing to leave BC to find more affordable stable housing for their family and would consider returning to the region to live and work nomadically for the growing season, since it just wasn't possible to afford permanent housing in the region. In addition, growers noted that the uncertainty of weather and climate affecting worker wages (e.g. If they don't work during a rainy day, they don't get paid) further makes affording housing difficult. Growers who participate in both the domestic job market and the TFWP have the added challenge of having to provide housing for the TFW, leaving them with minimal resources to support housing for their domestic workers.

It should be noted that some growers who are currently having success with their domestic labourers employ local workers who live in the region. This means they already have housing, although the widespread availability of local labour continues to be a challenge for many growers, for reasons detailed throughout this report.

⁴⁹ <https://www.livingwagebc.ca/calculations2024>

2 Poor Wages and Unpredictable Payment

Domestic agricultural workers in the Okanagan face several wage-related challenges, including inconsistent pay, wage stagnation, and difficulties in receiving payment. While domestic workers typically earn higher wages than foreign labourers, their pay rates vary widely depending on experience, role, and payment structure. General labourers commonly earn between \$18 and \$25 per hour, with experienced workers in specialized roles reaching \$30 per hour or more. Some domestic workers reported being offered wages as low as \$15 per hour in cash, while others experienced difficulties receiving their full wages from employers. Over half of the surveyed workers reported delayed or missing payments, with some forfeiting their earnings entirely.

The structure of agricultural pay varies by role and crop. Hourly wages are common in full-time roles and tasks requiring more highly skilled labour, while piece-rate pay is often used for seasonal work such as harvest. While some piece-rate workers have reported high earnings, up to \$50–\$60 per hour in peak conditions, others struggle with unpredictable income due to fluctuating crop yields, weather conditions, and declining bin rates. Additionally, some farms employ mixed payment structures, offering hourly pay when piece-rate earnings fall below minimum wage.

3 Climate Challenges

Extreme weather conditions significantly impact workers in the tree fruit industry, creating both physical hardships and logistical difficulties. As temperatures rise, many workers must start their shifts in the early morning hours to avoid extreme midday temperatures. While this schedule adjustment helps reduce direct sun exposure, it introduces other risks—labouring in darkness with headlamps increases the likelihood of injuries, and encounters with wildlife.

Beyond working conditions, recovery from a long day's labour is often compromised by inadequate living arrangements. Many workers sleep in tents, which offer little respite from heatwaves, making it difficult to regain energy for the next shift. In such extreme conditions, access to basic amenities like refrigeration and showers are becoming increasingly necessary.

Climate change has also exacerbated wildfire seasons, worsening air quality with smoke and pollutants. Not only does this make breathing difficult but also raises long-term health concerns for workers who spend hours outdoors. Conversely, extreme cold presents another challenge, as workers reported a perceived increase in workplace injuries with reduced dexterity in frigid conditions. Workers are often expected to provide their own protective gear to withstand both temperature extremes, adding an additional financial burden. These climate-related difficulties were cited by 10 out of the 13

workers interviewed, emphasizing the significant role that climate plays in experiences working in the industry.

4 Pesticide Exposure

Exposure to pesticides presents another major concern for workers, both in terms of immediate discomfort and long-term health risks. About a quarter of workers interviewed raised concerns about the effects of prolonged pesticide exposure, with one worker explaining:

“Because I’m getting older and it’s not the same energy I had 10 years ago. The effect of pesticides—you can feel them. At a certain moment, you need to stop before it’s too late.”

– (Participant 30)

One worker also suggested that the ubiquitous use of pesticides across the industry has created a bit of desensitization to how hazardous the sprays can in fact be to human health, making it difficult for workers to recognize early warning signs of harm.

Concerns are especially pronounced on large, industrial-scale farms where pesticide use is more intensive. One worker described their experience on such a farm:

“Some places, when it’s really factory-like, they just spray and spray without even looking. My skin was getting burnt, and I was like, ‘No, I don’t work here anymore.’”

– (Participant 13)

This highlights the need for greater transparency and accountability from growers regarding pesticide use. Workers believe that at a minimum, employers should be knowledgeable about the chemicals they use and take proactive steps to protect their employees from exposure.

5 Physical Labour

The physically demanding nature of the job is both a draw and a deterrent for workers. Some enter the industry because they enjoy working outdoors and engaging

in physical labour, seeing it as a way to stay in shape. However, as workers age, the toll on their bodies becomes more apparent. One worker expressed this internal conflict, stating:

“I feel like more and more, my body’s killing me. So I’d like something more relaxed, but at the same time, I really like it.”
– (Participant 16)

Phrases like “hard on the body” and “detrimental to your body” were used by multiple workers to describe the long-term effects of the job. Additionally, workers and growers alike perceive a generational shift in attitudes toward this kind of work. Those interviewed suggested that many younger workers are opting for minimum-wage jobs in climate-controlled environments rather than enduring the physically grueling conditions of farm labour outdoors. This is exacerbated by similar wage compensation between the two types of work. This reluctance among younger generations is likely contributing to labour shortages in the industry.

6 Safety Concerns

Workplace safety remains an ongoing issue for tree fruit workers. Several employees cited inadequate on-farm training, particularly in comparison to better training programs in other countries, such as New Zealand. However, there are signs of improvement, with some workers acknowledging that certain growers have become more safety-conscious in recent years. Unlike other industries where employers supply safety gear, farmworkers are often left to purchase their own, adding financial strain and reducing compliance with safety protocols.

Concerningly, three workers described safety concerns resulting from problematic work cultures. One worker highlighted concerns about harassment in camp settings, pointing to vulnerabilities faced by women in particular. There was also mention of farm cultures in which drug and alcohol use contributes to unsafe conditions, especially for those living on-site. This is a notable finding as one grower mentioned that they intentionally promote a workplace environment where drugs, alcohol and other “party” behaviours are not tolerated. This grower also noted the strong work ethic of their workers and high retention, and therefore low need of recruitment of domestic workers. This suggests that a safe and intentional work culture is a desirable trait in farm employment.

7 Undercutting from Illegal Workers

The increasing presence of undocumented agricultural workers in the Okanagan has introduced new challenges to the labour market. Respondents describe a growing number of workers employed without proper work permits, often on tourist visas. These individuals come from a range of places, including Europe and South America. Many enter the labour market informally, securing jobs through social media platforms and word-of-mouth.

One of the most pressing concerns related to undocumented workers is wage suppression. Many of these workers accept significantly lower wages, reportedly as low as \$12 per hour, undercutting legally employed farmworkers. The availability of lower-cost labour has reportedly contributed to declining bin rates for fruit picking, making it more difficult for legal domestic and foreign workers to secure fair wages. Some legal workers expressed frustration that returning seasonal employees were being displaced by undocumented labourers willing to work for lower pay.

8 Seasonality and Sporadic Nature of Work

A commonly mentioned challenge for workers in the industry was inconsistent work availability. Contributing factors include unpredictable work requirements, inherent seasonality of the work, and uncertain growing seasons. These factors are often layered and make it a key challenge to agricultural workers.

Workers in the agricultural sector face highly unpredictable employment patterns. Producers often operate on an on-call basis, only contracting work when certain harvesting needs arise. Participant 11 explained that they worked for a farmer who had “*individual contracts*” and that he only “*needs you when he needs you*”. They also mentioned that at times there would only be a day notice, making it hard for workers to know when work will be available. This type of pattern can lead to job insecurity among workers as they often have multiple employers and must move between jobs to piece sufficient work together. Participant 16 mentioned that working in the Okanagan has them jumping “*from one place to another depending on when [producers] need help*”.

Agricultural work is inherently seasonal. Busy periods follow cyclical patterns with different tasks completed at different times of the year. The seasonal nature of the work creates extended periods without work for some.

“There is 6 months where it’s pretty hard to find any work.”
– (Participant 21)

Workers in the industry face instability when it comes to employment, forcing them to piece together jobs based on crop-specific growing and harvesting periods. Although agricultural work is highly seasonal, some find that to be ideal. Some workers valued the freedom and flexibility that the work offered. Participant 31 appreciates being able to *“work for like 3 months... and then take few months off, go traveling”*. Thus, highlighting the need to target types of workers suited to such seasonal work. However, this may prove unsustainable over time. As Participant 21 explained,

“[a longer season] would be a plus for me as I’ve got family to support now. When I was younger, the short season was great, but now I need to pay \$1000 more a year to support everybody.”
– (Participant 21)

As workers’ familial responsibilities and financial needs evolve, the seasonal nature of employment—once a benefit—can become a barrier, prompting some to seek more stable income elsewhere.

Climate change has had an increasing impact on the wine grape and tree fruit industry in the Okanagan. Changing factors have led to inconsistent growing seasons, which leads to inconsistent work available. It also impacts the wages of the workers. According to participant 27, income can fluctuate in response to climate events. They further explain that in good years they can make an excess of \$30.00 an hour but during poor harvest years this can dip below minimum wage while working harder. This income unpredictability is particularly exposed in piece rate payment systems which participant 23 describes as *“financially, very, very hard”*.

These findings illustrate how the inherently variable nature of agricultural work creates a complex employment environment. It offers both flexibility and freedom to some, while problematic instability to others. As a result, the seasonal aspect of working in this industry arises as one of the key challenges cited by workers.



Appendix E:

Recommendations at-a-glance table

This appendix provides an at-a-glance summary of the key recommendations developed. It organizes recommendations by theme, responsible parties, implementation methods, and timeframes. The following stakeholders are proposed for inclusion in implementation (relevant acronyms are listed):

Federal Government:

- AAFC (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada)
- CBSA (Canada Border Services Agency)
- CRA (Canada Revenue Agency)
- DoFC (Department of Finance Canada)
- ESDC (Employment and Social Development Canada)
- IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada)
- ISET (Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program)

Provincial Government:

- BC Housing
- BC Transit
- BCALC (Agricultural Land Commission)
- BCESC (Employment Standards Coalition)
- BCMAF (BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food)
- BCMH (BC Ministry of Health)
- BCMOF (BC Ministry of Finance)
- BCMoEaCS (Ministry of Energy and Climate Solutions)
- BCMoECC (Ministry of Education and Child Care)
- BCMoE (Ministry of Education)
- BCMoEP (Ministry of Environment and Parks)
- BCMoI (Ministry of Infrastructure)
- BCMoIRR (BC Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation)
- BCMoL (Ministry of Labour)
- BCMoHMA (Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs)
- BCMPSFS (Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills)
- BCMoTACS (Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport)
- BCMoTT (Ministry of Transportation and Transit)
- WorkBC

Local Governments Industry Associations:

- BCAC (BC Agriculture Council)
- BC Fruit Works
- BCCA (BC Cherry Association)
- BCFGA (BC Fruit Grower's Association)
- BCGGA (BC Grape Grower's Association)
- BCWGC (BC Wine Grape Council)
- CCLSP (Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project)
- SWGBC (Sustainable Winegrowing BC)

Growers NGO's:

- Active Transport NGO's: Local Motive, BC Healthy Communities, etc.
- Ag Safe BC
- CAHRC (Canadian Agriculture Human Resources Council)
- Conservation NGOs: World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Nature Conservancy of Canada, etc.
- IAF (Investment Agriculture Foundation)
- Young Agrarians

Professional Association:

(PIBC) Planning Institute of BC

Tourism associations:

Destination BC

Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association (TOTA),

Tourism Kelowna

Silviculture Industry Organizations:

Canadian Forestry Association (CFA), etc

Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC)

Post-Secondary Institutions:

KPU ISFS (Kwantlen Polytechnic University Institute for Sustainable Food Systems)

Recommendation	Description	Who	How	Timeframe	Example Precedents
Housing and Worker Amenities					
Provide direct payments to workers for housing	Offer financial support to domestic agricultural workers to offset housing costs in high-rent regions.	ESDQ; BCMoHMA	employment/income assistance; structured seasonally, tied to work placements	Short-term (1–3 years)	NZ RSE Scheme – subsidized housing, relocation, bonuses, accommodation standards
Support growers to build or upgrade on-farm amenities	Support growers with financial assistance or red-tape reducing programming for amenity additions like kitchens, washrooms, and rest areas.	AAFC; BCMAF; BCMoI; BCMoL; IAF; Local Government Planning Departments	Programs to streamline building process, and direct financing for amenity additions.	Medium-term (2–5 years)	Canada Plan Service, USDA Farm Labor Housing Program; BC Farmworker COVID Safety Program
Explore development of off-farm communal worker housing	Explore development of off-farm housing for seasonal workers, including permanent and campground-type options.	BCMAF; BCMoI; BCMoL; BCMoHMA; BC Housing; Local Government	Support and expand RDOS pilot; feasibility study for permanent public land infrastructure	Medium-term (2–5 years)	Secrest Hill Agricultural Worker’s Campsite
Education and Training					
Develop funded apprenticeships and regional ag-training programs	Create hands-on, regionally specific training programs with mentorship in viticulture/horticulture.	ESDQ; BCMPSFS; BCMAF; Young Agrarians; Local Motive; Post-Secondary Institutions; Industry Associations; CAHRC	Funded tuition/stipends via SCAP; region-specific curriculum; hands-on placements	Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)	Student Work Placement Program (Canada); Young Agrarians Apprenticeship; AgSkilled (Australia); KPU Farm School
Support development of post-secondary ag-related programs	Support creation or expansion of ag/horticulture/viticulture programs and farm business courses.	BCMPSFS; BCMAF; Post-Secondary Institutions; Industry Associations; CAHRC	Partnerships for curriculum development; provincial grants and SCAP funding	Long-term (5+ years)	BC Davis Ag Engineering, Doubling Ag Sciences; Brock Grape/Wine; KPU Sustainable Ag; UBC Land and Food
Improve on-farm orientation, safety, and skill training	Enhance on-farm worker orientation and safety through accessible resources and seasonal onboarding.	BCMOL; BCMAF; CAHRC; Industry Associations; Growers	Resources provided via industry/government; potential labour liaison to deliver field training	Immediate	AgSafe HR Toolkit; AGSafe Safety Courses; US Ag Harassment Training; Agri Academy; Canadian Agriculture Safety Society
Transportation and Access					
Fund regional transportation supports for workers	Develop affordable and reliable transit to farms for domestic workers.	BCMOTT; BC Transit; Local Governments	digital tools; subsidized public transit passes	term (1–3 years)	California Vanpools; AgMove (Australia)
Invest in safe active transportation infrastructure to farms	Develop safe bike/walk routes to farms near populated areas.	BCMOTT; BCMoTACS; BCMoEP; IAF; Local Governments	Invest in farm corridors; develop cycling infrastructure; farm incentives for active transport and agri-tourism	Long-term (5+ years)	N/A
Support seasonal bike-share and ride-share programs	Implement flexible, low-cost community-based bike/ride-share for workers.	BCMOTT; NGOs; Local Governments	Fund bike-share; mobile apps for rural rides; employer carpools; adapt municipal fleets	Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)	Go! Vermont; Shasta Bike Share; Lime (Kelowna); Lower Similkameen Bike Program
Worker Recruitment and Retention					
Establish a domestic labour liaison position	Create a liaison position to connect workers and growers, deliver training, and recruit.	BC Fruit Works with Industry Associations; IAF	Establish position with industry collaboration; recruit bilingual candidate with field experience	Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)	Former BCF-GA liaison position (pre-BC Fruit Works)
Launch domestic labour recruitment campaigns	Promote agricultural work to youth and Quebecois through marketing campaigns.	BCMOTACS; BCMAF; BCMoECC; Industry Associations via BC Fruit Works; Tourism associations (TOTA; Destination BC; Tourism Kelowna etc.)	Targeted, multilingual campaigns using influencers, media, and job platforms	Short-term (1–3 years)	Pick for Britain; Das Land Hilft (Germany); HortNZ Campaign
Offer wage top-ups and completion bonuses	Provide financial incentives to improve domestic worker retention.	ESDQ; DoFC; BCMoF; Growers	Bonuses through producers post-contract; align with wage support programs	Short-term (1–3 years)	Seasonal Work Assistance (NZ); AgMove (Australia); Pandemic Pay Program for essential workers
Provide employer subsidies to hire local workers	Offset hiring/training costs for growers hiring domestic workers.	ESDQ; DoFC; BCMoF	Wage subsidies or training offsets to reduce onboarding costs	Medium-term (2–5 years)	Agricultural Employment Promotion Program (Spain)
Engage youth, underrepresented groups, and career switchers	Promote inclusive ag careers through campaigns, job fairs, and training.	ESDQ; BCMoTACS; BCMAF; BCMoECC; WorkBC; BC Fruit Works; School Districts; Tourism associations (TOTA; Destination BC; Tourism Kelowna etc.)	Targeted campaigns and entry-level training programs	Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)	Young Canadians Summer Jobs; Quebec student recruitment campaigns
Prioritize positive workplace cultures	Foster inclusive, respectful workplaces with fair treatment and support systems.	BCMOL; BC Fruit Works; AgSafe; CAHRC; Growers	Create HR policies, support systems, host social events, promote fair practices	Ongoing	AgSafe HR Toolkit; WFCA Statement; Lower Similkameen Society
Explore whole-industry extended benefits plan	Establish portable health, dental, and retirement plans for workers.	BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations	Design joint-funded benefits plan for fruit and wine industries	Medium-term (2–5 years)	BC Agriculture Council Benefits Program
Review and modify piece-rate structures	Ensure domestic workers earn minimum wage through piece-rate reform.	BCMOL; BCESC	Research and revise employment standards to guarantee wage minimums	Short to Medium-term (1–5 years)	BC Employment Standards Coalition; Australian Horticulture Award

Create a work program to provide tuition credit incentives	Develop a government-supported summer agricultural work program for youth that awards tuition credits in exchange for seasonal farm work	ESDC; CRA; BCMPSFS; BCMoF; Post-secondary Institutions	Design and pilot a program in partnership with key ministries and post-secondary institutions. Establish a verification system for hours worked on approved farms.	Short to Medium term (1-5 years)	Youth Community Action Program; Sport Canada Tuition Credit Program
Partner with Indigenous organizations and communities for training and job placement	Develop collaborative programs with Indigenous organizations and communities to support training, certification, and job-matching services tailored to agricultural employment in the Okanagan.	ESDC (ISET); BCMoLRR; BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations; CAHRC; First Nations bands	Establish working groups with Indigenous organizations to co-create training and employment pathways	Medium-term (2-5 years)	Natural Resources Training Group's Indigenous Training Program
Explore Establishment of a multi-Industry seasonal "work circuit"	There is potential to formalize a "work circuit" with the ski tourism, agricultural and silviculture industries.	BCMoL; CCLSP; BC Fruit Works; Silviculture Industry Organizations; Tourism associations (TOTA; Destination BC; Tourism Kelowna etc.)	Convene representatives from each industry to discuss the implementation of the circuit. Funding of a coordinator who promotes and recruits workers.	Medium-term (1-5 years)	N/A
Explore and pilot peer-led recruitment strategies	Peer-recruitment of workers by returning domestic workers, including financial incentives.	BCMAF; BCMoL; Industry Associations; BC Fruit Works; CAHRC	Seek funding from the province for a pilot program whereby returning domestic workers receive training/ incentives to recruit and support additional workers.	Medium-term (1-5 years)	Blue Mountain Resort Student Referral Program
Awareness and Advocacy					
Educate on impacts of undocumented labour	Raise awareness among growers/workers about risks of informal labour.	ESDC; BCMoL; BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations	Campaigns, materials, workshops highlighting legal and injury coverage risks	Short to Medium-term (1-5 years)	N/A
Advocate for improved worker accommodations	Advocate for better on-farm housing standards and funding access.	BC Fruit Works; Industry Associations	Engage municipalities/provinces; address zoning, permitting, and funding barriers	Medium-term (2-5 years)	N/A
Advocate for BC Fruit Works as permanent initiative	Formalize BC Fruit Works as a year-round coordinating body for labour.	Industry Associations	Secure funding; position as workforce strategy hub for outreach and data	Short to Medium-term (1-5 years)	N/A
Conduct grower audit	Survey growers to identify HR, housing, and recruitment challenges.	CCLSP; BC Fruit Works; KPU ISFS; CAHRC	Structured survey/interviews to inform support and policy design	Short-term (1-3 years)	N/A
Policy Reform					
Advocate for TFWP reform	Improve protections and flexibility for TFWs while supporting local labour.	ESDC; BCMoL; Industry Associations	Consultations and evidence-based proposals for program improvements	Medium-term (2-5 years)	PALM (Australia); RSE (NZ)
Align local and ALC policies	Address inconsistencies between ALC and local government land use policies.	BC ALC; CCLSP; Local Governments; KPU ISFS; PIBC	Policy analysis to identify discrepancies and propose local amendments	Short to Medium-term (1-5 years)	CCLSP ag tour initiative
Review and reform existing working visa extension requirements	Explore possibility of creating or altering existing policy to allow working visa holders to extend their stay by completing agricultural work.	ESDC; IRCC; CBSA	Advocate for a review of the working visa program to include an option to extend by completing employment in the agricultural sector.	Medium to Long-term (3-7 years)	Australia Working Holiday VISA Extension
Explore changes to Employment Insurance benefits for agricultural workers	Extending eligible benefit period for farm workers could attract labour to the sector as they would be insured income in the off-season.	ESDC; DoFC; BCMoL; CCLSP	Review of the federal EI program to increase benefits for agricultural workers.	Medium to Long-term (3-7 years)	N/A
Industry Viability					
Reform BRM programs to support small farms	Adapt AgriStability to support small/diverse farms with simplified criteria.	BCMAF; BCAG; CAHRC	Consultations; pilot programs for small/mixed farm inclusion	to Long-term (3-7 years)	AgriStability; Edible Hort Program (ON); BC Farm Income Assurance Act
Explore payments for ecosystem services	Pay growers for ecological services (pollinators, biodiversity, etc.).	BCMAF; BCMoEaCS; IAF; Conservation NGOs	Expand Farmland Advantage; develop orchard-specific metrics	Medium-term (2-5 years)	Farmland Advantage; AESI
Expand Buy BC/local branding	Increase grower participation in regional branding to boost market visibility.	BCMAF; BCMoTACS; Tourism associations (TOTA; Destination BC; Tourism Kelowna etc.)	Grants for brand use; retail partnerships for co-marketing	Medium-term (1-5 years)	Buy BC; Apple Producers of Quebec; NZ Apples & Pears
Improve post-production and value-added supports	Develop infrastructure and training for food processing and packaging.	BCMoL; BCMAF; IAF	Fund processing infrastructure; expand Food Hub network	Medium-term (2-5 years)	BC Food Hub Network; Broken Ladder (case study)
Develop HR, legal, and compliance resources	Provide centralized HR guidance and tools for small/mid-sized farms.	BCMoL; BC Fruit Works; CAHRC	Create HR templates, compliance guides, and self-assessment tools	Short-term (1-3 years)	AgSafe HR
Develop workforce management training	Train employers in HR, retention, and respectful worker management.	BCMoL; BC Fruit Works; CAHRC	Partner with HR professionals to offer workshops and modules	term (1-3 years)	AgSafe HR resources

Appendix F: Precedent Descriptions

Housing and Worker Amenities

Canada Plan Service (CPS) (CAN, 1953–1973⁵⁰) – A federal-provincial initiative that standardized farm-building designs aligned with national building codes. CPS offered over 200 pre-drawn plans for structures like barns and washrooms, streamlining permitting and improving building quality.

New Zealand Seasonal Work Scheme (NZ) – government program designed to encourage domestic unemployed or low-income workers to take up short-term employment in the agricultural sector. The program provides financial incentives, including support for relocation costs, accommodation subsidies, and completion bonuses for workers who fulfill their seasonal contracts. By offering these supports, the program aims to strengthen the domestic labour force and reduce reliance on temporary foreign workers.

USDA Department of Rural Development on-farm housing loans (USA) – Provides financing options for farmers to develop or renovate rental housing. It is targeted to low- and middle-income seasonal farm workers. The USDA outlines tenants eligible as employees who earn most of their income through farm labour, retired farm labourers, and disabled employees. It also funds an increase in supply of financially accessible housing for labourers on farms. Funding is in the form of low interest loans and those who are eligible include family farms and associations of farmers. Applicants apply through the USDA and funding is available on a first-come, first served basis or until funding is fully allocated.

BC Seasonal Domestic Farmworker COVID-19 Safety Program (BC) – The program provides financial relief to farmers who employed domestic farm workers in 2021. It was aimed at providing reimbursement for covid-related costs. Farmers could apply for up to 70% reimbursement for eligible on-farm improvements to a maximum of \$2,000 per farm.

Secrest Hill Agricultural Worker's Campsite (BC) – The Regional district of Okanagan Similkameen (RDOS) assumed management of what was formerly known as the Loose Bay campground, an informal campsite that was heavily used by agricultural workers. Supported by the Province of British Columbia, the RDOS made upgrades to the campsite in 2022 to improve onsite accommodation. Initial upgrades included the construction of picnic tables. The campsite has 125 individual sites and hosts workers employed in various agricultural operations. This project should be monitored and adapted as necessary to provide much-needed worker accommodation.

Training and Education

Australia National Farmers Federation AgSkilled program (AUS) – A program that helps current and prospective agricultural workers with career entry pathways, making it easier for new workers to enter the industry. The program also provides training in production, business, technology and safety. It is aimed at workers in multiple industries which include horticulture and viticulture. Training is delivered in the form of courses which are made up of units of competencies (classes). Each class is offered by various organizations providing education and workforce training. Applicants are limited in funding to 8 units of competency and any combination of classes can be applied for.

Young Agrarians' Apprenticeship Program (BC) – Offers paid opportunities for aspiring farmers to gain hands on experience in agriculture. The program connects apprentices and farmers for 4–12 months where participants engage in daily farm operations.

Agricultural and Food Science Degree at the University College of Dublin (IRL) – A multidisciplinary program that equips students with scientific, technical, and business knowledge to address challenges in sustainable agriculture and global food systems. Students spend an average of 40 hours a week attending lectures, tutorials and laboratory-based practicals, and undertake independent study.

Agricultural Engineering Degree at UC Davis (USA) – An engineering program that trains students to develop and apply technologies for efficient, sustainable agricultural production and resource management. Teaches students in the fields of agricultural production, food quality, and food safety through research, teaching, and outreach.

Brock University's Degree in Applied Grape and Wine Science (ON) – A specialized program integrating viticulture, oenology, and wine business education tailored to the needs of Ontario's grape and wine industry. It is the only University in Canada that offers a degree in grape/wine science. Offers students experience in lab and field settings and provides insight into vineyard and winemaking operations.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Farm School (BC) – A hands-on, community-based training program that teaches regenerative agriculture and business skills through immersive fieldwork and mentorship on local institutional farms. Some learning outcomes include market crop production, on-farm construction, fruit production and mechanics.

⁵⁰ Canada Department of Agriculture. (1978). *Canada Plan Service: A 25-year history of service to Canadian agriculture (1953–1978)*. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/aac-aafc/agrhist/A54-2-12-1978-eng.pdf

KPU's Sustainable Agriculture Program (BC) –

Blending classroom and hands-on farm learning, the program equips students with a practical and holistic understanding of agro-ecosystem science, ecological crop production, sustainable farm business practices, and solutions to today's food system challenges.

UBC's Faculty of Land and Food Systems (BC) –

Interdisciplinary faculty offering a Bachelor Science in Food, Nutrition and Health which spans from the production and processing of food to its marketing, consumption, and impact on community and individual health.

AgSafe Human Resources Toolkit (BC) – A

comprehensive online resource that supports BC farm employers with templates and guidance on hiring, onboarding, and managing workers safely and legally. Also provides consulting on retention and engagement which includes guidelines on compensation/benefits, recognition, and provincial/federal employment legislation.

AGSafe Training and Safety Awareness Courses

(BC) – A series of in-person and online courses designed to promote health and safety awareness for agricultural workers and employers in BC. It also provides informational and risk management modules. Primarily offered in English but several courses available with translated presentation materials.

US. Agriculture Safety & Health Center's Prevention Sexual Harassment in Agriculture Training (USA) – A

video developed as part of the Center's ¡Basta! Prevent Sexual Harassment in Agriculture worksite training and toolkit designed for the agricultural workplace. The toolkit includes 5 videos, workplace policies, and resources for growers and workers.

BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food's Training Video on Apple Crop Load Management (BC) A practical,

visual guide to help apple growers optimize fruit quality and yield through effective crop load management techniques. Helps teach orchard workers pruning high density apples for crop load management. Available in English, Punjabi, and Spanish.

Agri Academy (NZ Dairy) – An online learning hub offering short, skills-based courses tailored to the New Zealand dairy sector's workforce development needs. It does so by providing an extensive library of videos, pdf informational packages, and knowledge-testing quizzes. They also provide practical on-farm follow-up sessions to provide hands-on experience.

Canadian Agriculture Safety Society's Video for TFW Safety (CAN) – A culturally sensitive orientation video

designed to introduce temporary foreign agricultural workers to key safety practices on Canadian farms. Some of the topics include the use of personal protective equipment, sun safety, chemical and pesticide use, and machinery hazards.

Canadian Agriculture Safety Courses for Employees Program (CAN) – Resource available to producers to

improve domestic worker retention by improving on-farm orientation, safety, and skills training. The resource can be used to adequately onboard new hires by preparing workers for safe and successful experiences. Offers accessible, sector-specific safety training courses to help agricultural employees reduce workplace risks.

Student Work Placement Program (CAN) – Provides wage subsidies to employers hiring post-secondary students for integrated work and learning opportunities. It aims to close the gap between education and employment and is designed to offer students paid experience in their field of study. Program is delivered through partnerships between federal government, industry associations, and post-secondary institutions.

Transportation and Access

California Agricultural Worker Vanpools (USA) – A

project that funded safe, affordable and reliable transportation to agricultural workers in the San Joaquin Valley. They utilized vans which were available to workers to drive themselves and others to their places of work. Riders are required to pay a fare which helps maintain the fleet of vehicles.

AgMove (AUS) – The Australian government offers up to \$6,000 for people who relocate for short term agricultural work, which includes harvest work. The program covers costs related to accommodation (rent, campsite, etc.), travel costs, and work equipment. The workers must travel at least 90 minutes from their current location and must not be within any metropolitan areas, encouraging rural work. It also offers up to \$2,000 to those on work visas.

Go! Vermont (USA) – is a program that helps people find transportation options including carpool matching and vanpooling for people with common destinations. It also provides resources/incentives to encourage public transportation use or other modes of transport. It is run by the Vermont Agency of Transportation.

Shasta Living Streets Bike Share (USA) and **Lime**

Bikes/Scooters (BC-Kelowna) – Provide alternative transportation options in the form of electric bikes and scooters. Users unlock vehicles by paying for a pass or paying by distance traveled. They can be dropped off in designated areas and found using the in-app map which alerts riders to the closest bike or scooter.

Lower Similkameen Community Services Society Bike Share program for seasonal workers (BC-Similkameen)–

Bike lending program available to temporary foreign workers to provide free active transportation to places of work. Partnered with local community organizations to provide the upkeep and maintenance of bicycles.

Worker Recruitment and Retention

BC Fruit Growers' Association liaison position (BC) – A position prior to the establishment of BC Fruit Works which welcomed, provided safety and orientation training, and directed domestic workers to jobs on Okanagan farms. Focused on collaboration within the industry and face to face engagement. The position required an understanding of the experiences faced by both workers and producers and their needs and challenges.

Pick for Britain (UK) – Launched in response to the agricultural labour shortage during COVID-19. The campaign aimed to recruit domestic agricultural workers by promoting agricultural jobs as patriotic, essential, and vital to national food security. They focused on marketing efforts, job matching, and public awareness campaigns. Not entirely successful, but lessons learned could provide insights.

Das Land Hilft (Germany) – A government launched campaign encouraging students, unemployed people, and laid off workers to fill seasonal agricultural jobs during COVID 19. They matched domestic workers with farms urgently needing labour, there was moderate success with the program.

HortNZ Seasonal Labour Campaign (NZ) – An initiative to promote jobs and careers in the horticulture industry. Lays out career pathways in addition to providing an online 'taster course' with multiple offerings to get people interested in the industry.

Seasonal Work Assistance (NZ) A wage top up available to New Zealand citizens in seasonal horticulture or viticulture work. It is aimed at workers who have stopped receiving benefits to go into seasonal work or have lost wages due to bad weather. The rate at which workers can receive funding is equal to the minimum wage for up to 40 hours a week. The maximum amount that can be claimed in a 26-week period is \$2,176.

Agricultural Employment Promotion Program (Spain) – A program which addresses labour and social issues in the agriculture sector, specifically in rural regions. It provides subsidized salaries and farmers receive financial incentives to hire local Spanish workers during labor intensive periods. The program has also implemented an altered unemployment benefit system in which domestic workers can still collect benefits by completing a minimum number of workdays in the season (around 35-60 days). The program aims to promote local labour and reduce the dependency on migrant workers in the industry.

Hire-a-Student Program (now Young Canadians Canada Summer Jobs) (CAN) – Canada Summer Jobs is a government program that helps employers create jobs for young Canadians across the country. The campaign timing, objectives, and delivery closely align with the federal Hire-a-Student program. Provides: Full-time

work in Canada, for a minimum of 6 weeks. An inclusive and non-discriminatory work environment. Support for learning and skills development.

AgSafe HR (BC) – Provides consulting to help agriculture employers with creating HR policies for their businesses. They assist with recruitment, onboarding, and managing employees. Provides retention strategies which include advising on a wide range of benefits such as rewards/recognition, sick leave/leave of absences, fair compensation, etc.

BC Agriculture Council Employee Benefits Program (BC) – The benefits program aims to provide medical coverage for ranches or farms with employees. Currently there are multiple plans based on different needs but do not cover tree fruit or wine grape farms. Expansion of benefit program could make jobs in the Okanagan tree fruit and wine grape industries more attractive.

The Western Forestry Contractors' Association's Statement of Commitment to Improving Workplace Safety and Preventing Harassment and Violence in Treeplanting and Other Forestry Work (BC) – A detailed strategy on building an industry that empowers professional growth while eliminating the risk of workplace harassment and violence as well as other safety hazards, particularly for women. Enacted by the forestry industry, strategies and lessons could be adopted and fine-tuned for the agriculture industry in the Okanagan.

Lower Similkameen Community Services Society Similkameen Seasonal Workers Program (BC) – Community led program that provides services and assistance to temporary foreign workers. Includes welcome packages, referrals to essential services, emergency assistance, and social activities to name a few. Could act as a blueprint for similar programs to support domestic labour recruitment and retention.

BC Employment Standards Coalition (BC) – An employment standards resource that promotes progressive employment standards legislation and enforcement that responds to the needs of all workers. They promote fair treatment, decent wages, and good working conditions.

Australian Horticulture Award (AUS) – Employment standards that require all horticulture employees to be paid minimum wage, even through piece rate payment schemes. Also outlines other progressive employment standards and serves as a resource for employers to adhere to the award.

Youth Community Action program (BC) – Launched in spring 2001, the Youth Community Action program, part of the Youth Options BC suite, allowing young people to earn post-secondary tuition credits at a rate of \$8 per volunteering hour. The initiative aimed to equip youth with practical skills, volunteer experience, and meaningful contributions to their communities, while reducing the cost of further education.

Natural Resources Training Group's Indigenous Training Program (BC) – Offers custom indigenous training tailored to a community's needs. This includes comprehensive online environmental programs and indigenous training courses. Currently there are topics covering environmental management, wildlife surveys, habitat restoration, and cultural heritage. Programs last 1-5 weeks depending on the needs of the community.

Blue Mountain Resort Student Referral Program (ON) – Provides an opportunity for workers to refer peers for a bonus. Those who refer an employee who successfully attains employment are eligible for a \$350 bonus.

Pandemic Pay Program for Essential Workers (BC) – The Government of British Columbia, in partnership with the federal government, provided temporary pandemic pay to more than 250,000 workers, offering a payment of approximately \$4 per hour. The program was administered through employers and did not require individual workers to apply. The initiative helped retain workers in essential but lower-wage roles. The program ran through a 16-week period during the height of the pandemic.

Sport Canada Tuition Program – A federal program that provides direct financial assistance to Canadian high performance athletes. Supports athletes with living and training allowances which are intended to offset costs incurred as a result of their participation in high level sporting activity. More specifically, the program offers tuition support to aid athletes in obtaining a post-secondary education. Financial support allocated by the program is non-taxable.

Policy Reform

Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme (AUS) – The PALM scheme permits approved agricultural employers, including labour hire companies, to bring in workers from the Pacific Island, once proven there is not enough local labour available, and deploy workers across multiple farms and regions. While not supporting domestic workers, this program offers flexibility to address seasonal labour demands.

Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme (NZ) – The RSE scheme allows seasonal horticulture or viticulture workers from the Pacific Islands to be hired once employers prove a genuine effort to recruit local workers has been made. The program allows workers to transfer between different employers and regions within New Zealand, provided there is mutual agreement and approval from Immigration New Zealand, enhancing adaptability for both workers and employers

Australia Working Holiday VISA Extension (AUS) – Those on a working holiday VISA may apply to extend their stay in the country by working in specified sectors, including agriculture. Applicants must work for at least 88 days

in order to apply and can even extend for a third year by repeating the process. They must also provide proof of such work, such as pay slips to prove completion of required work.

CCLSP Agricultural Tours – Bring local government, First Nations, planning staff, producers, industry associations, and the province together to share perspectives and discuss challenges and opportunities related to local and provincial agricultural policies and regulations.

Support for Industry Viability

Agri-Stability (BC) – AgriStability operates as a margin-based program. It compares a producer's current year product margin to a historical reference margin. If the current margin falls more than 30% below the reference margin, the program covers 80% of the loss beyond that threshold. The reference margin is typically based on the average of the past five years, excluding the highest and lowest years. This approach is intended to smooth out any anomalies but can be problematic for newer or smaller farms that lack extensive historical data, or who have faced multiple successive poor crop years that drive down their reference margin.

Edible Horticulture Support Program (ON) – This program's goal is to provide financial support to small and medium sized agricultural operations producing eligible crops. It helps farms adjust to increased costs they may experience as a result of circumstances out of their control.

BC Farm Income Assurance Act (BC) – Legislation passed by the BC government in the seventies which was intended to stabilize farm income by addressing the unpredictable nature of farm work. Financial peaks of years with good returns would be used to fill in the years of bad returns.

The Farmland Advantage Program (BC) – targets at-risk ecosystems in BC and compensates farmers for undertaking ecological mitigations on these lands. A program like this could be developed with the dual goals of improving tree fruit and wine grape industry viability as well as sensitive habitat protection.

Agri-Ecosystem Stewardship Initiative (BC) – Supports on-farm ecological goods and services which were previously funded by the farmland advantage program. AESI helps farmers identify the natural values on a farm that can be protected, restored, and enhanced and develops recommendations and plans to preserve them. Actions may include establishing stream setbacks, building strategic fencing, undertaking reforestation, implementing rotational grazing practices on rangeland, thinning and pruning tree stands, or removing debris to reduce wildfire fuels.

Grow BC, Feed BC, Buy BC (BC) – Help promote BC industries and expand local food production. It also encourages and increases the use of BC grown products by promoting their use in government facilities (Hospitals, schools, etc.). Provides a marketing program that boosts awareness, demand, and sales of BC products (agriculture, food, beverage).

Apple Producers of Quebec, NZ Apples & Pears Inc. (QC, NZ) – organizations that promote their product and comprise of partnerships of orchards/farms in the industry. The Quebec program even offers online sales of product. Large hub of information available about their industries and initiatives.

BC Food hub network (BC) – Consists of 13 commercial food processing hubs. They support local economic growth and provide jobs by providing shared-use infrastructure, equipment and services. Expands local food processing capacity and allows smaller producers to access such services.

Additional Precedents Worth Exploring

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (EU) – is the European Union's main agricultural framework, established in 1962 to support farmers, ensure food security, protect the environment, and sustain rural communities. The current CAP (2023–2027) emphasizes flexibility, environmental sustainability, and social fairness, allowing each EU country to create its own strategic plan. With a budget of €386.6 billion, it funds both direct payments to farmers (Pillar I) and rural development programs (Pillar II). Key features include support for eco-schemes, small farms, and young farmers, aiming to foster resilient agriculture and generational renewal across the EU.



