



London

COVID-19 restrictions on migrant workers will be devastating, Ontario farmers warn

Growers want the government to provide an exemption, warn of food shortages

[Andrew Lupton](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 17, 2020 2:33 PM ET | Last Updated: March 17



Ontario growers say they are completely reliant on migrant workers to help sow and harvest fruit and vegetables during the growing season. (Jason Kryk/Canadian Press)

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Ontario farmers say they're worried as COVID-19 travel restrictions announced Monday are already stopping migrant workers from entering the country, something they say could devastate the province's fruit and vegetable growers as the spring planting season draws near.

- [**Canada to bar entry to travellers who are not citizens, permanent residents or Americans**](#)

"We will see shortages within our grocery stores in spring, summer and fall if the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SWAP) is put on hold and we're not allowed to bring those workers in," said Ken Wall, CEO of Sandy Shore Farms.

His farm grows produce on 1,500 acres near Port Burwell, Ont. His operation relies on about 200 seasonal workers each year. The workers come from Mexico and the Caribbean.

The federal government has closed the Canadian border to anyone except Canadian citizens, permanent residents and U.S. citizens. The new rules are part of sweeping restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected more than 182,000 people and killed more than 7,100 worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins University.

As they're written now, the new border restrictions prevent seasonal workers from entering Canada.

Ontario farmers say this has the potential to devastate an industry that last year brought in about 18,000 seasonal workers to sow seeds, pick produce and perform other farm work.

Crucial to food supply

The SWAP program operates under an agreement between the Canadian government and the countries that supply workers.

Wall said SWAP, which has been operating for 50 years, is crucial to the industry.

"Without access to the migrant worker program, I'm going to venture to say that some 90 to 95 per cent of the vegetables and the fruits that are normally produced and harvested in Canada will not see the light of day," said Wall.

He said importing produce from the United States — a country facing the same challenges as Canada — isn't a solution.

"If we think somehow or other that foodstuffs are going to magically appear and come across the border and fill our shelves, and we're going to have lots of carrots and beans and potatoes? Let's give our heads a shake," he said.

The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association tweeted that if the issue isn't solved it will have "serious implications" for growers and the entire sector.

**OFVGA**

@OntFruitVeg

Members & Ontario Growers: We recognize the news yesterday came as a shock and if not solved has serious implications for individual growers and the sector as a whole. We are working vehemently with our partners to ensure growers will have the labour resources they require.#ontag



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Keith Currie, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, said without seasonal workers some Ontario farms may opt to cut back production, or simply not plant at all.

"It's certainly very concerning right now," he said.

Like Wall, Currie is calling on the federal government to find a way workers can be safely brought to Canada, perhaps with enhanced screening.

"When our border is open to the U.S., we're questioning why we can't make provisions to bring these workers in," said Currie.

Asparagus growers under the gun

Bernie Solymar, executive director of the Asparagus Growers of Ontario, says his members are really feeling the pinch.

Asparagus is harvested in May and growers typically have their workforce at the farms for prep work and training by early April.

When asparagus spears are ready to be harvested, the work needs to happen quickly or the crop can be lost.

"It's a daily harvest most years, depending on the weather," said Solymar. "It doesn't lend itself to any delays, it has to be done on a daily basis."



Horacio Gallegos, a Mexican migrant worker, harvests tomatoes in Leamington, Ont. Ontario growers say they need an exception to COVID-19 travel restrictions that prevent seasonal workers from coming to Canada. (Jason Kryk/The Canadian Press)

As for the idea of making up the labour gap with Canadian workers, Wall said it's something the industry has tried for years, but without success.

"We can't get Canadians to take these jobs and do the type of stoop labour that is required to harvest fruit and vegetables in our farms," he said.

Migrant workers will also suffer

The entry restrictions are also hurting migrant farm workers.

Chris Ramsaroop, of the group Justice for Migrant Workers, says a group of about 100 seasonal workers was scheduled to arrive on a farm near London, Ont., on Tuesday night but were told the trip was cancelled hours before they were set to depart.

"For many of these migrant workers, this is the only type of employment they have, period," he said. "Many of them are unemployed when they return home. This income is extremely important for them."

Ramsaroop called on both levels of government to ensure that if any workers are brought to Canada to work, they have access to health care should they fall ill, and Employment Insurance if their jobs end suddenly.

"No worker should be repatriated, terminated or deported for falling ill or sick at work because of this current pandemic," he said.

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