



# Reframing the Farm Labour Crisis in Ontario

A report by the National Farmers Union – Ontario  
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The logo for Employment Ontario, featuring the words "EMPLOYMENT" and "ONTARIO" in white, bold, uppercase letters on a dark red rectangular background.

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- **To promote the betterment of farmers** in the attainment of their economic and social goals;
- **To conduct projects** for the benefit of farmers in the development of markets for, and the marketing of, farm products;
- **To achieve the reduction of costs and other measures designed to increase the economic benefits of farming;**
- **To conduct research** for the benefit of farmers;
- **To promote and secure legislation** and other forms of government action for the benefit of farmers;
- **To promote a higher standard of community** in agriculture;
- **To provide services** for its members consistent with its objects and work jointly with any other persons or organizations for the attainment of its objects.

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## Executive Summary

Growing concerns over a “farm labour crisis” or “farm labour shortage” have not taken into account the unique labour conditions on small and mid-sized farms. There is a need to reframe the discussion on the farm labour crisis to better understand how labour shortages are felt and understood within smaller operations compared with large agribusinesses. The voices of agriculturalists committed to creating local, just, and sustainable food systems are too often drowned out by corporate lobbyists.

In April 2020, the NFU-O embarked on a Farm Labour Project to study agricultural labour issues on small and mid-sized farms. The following report and recommendations are based on a mixed-methods study that included a survey of 772 farm operators and workers, stakeholder consultations, informal interviews, online group discussions, and a literature review.

The study found that **small to mid-sized farms are robust agricultural job creators**. In fact, farms under 70 acres were more likely to employ Ontarians than their larger counterparts. Temporary Foreign Workers make up only 8.5% of the workforce on small and mid-sized farms compared to 30% across the entire sector. Many of the farms surveyed provide extensive farm training and are the **knowledge incubators** for the next generation of farmers. There is plenty of work on these farms, and plenty of people are attracted to the work and the rural lifestyle.

**There is, however, a shortage of living-wage agricultural jobs which has led to a scarcity of skilled and experienced workers.**

The reasons for a shortage of living-wage agricultural jobs are complicated. A farm income crisis has left small and mid-sized producers with little take-home income to pay themselves, let alone their essential workforce. After thirty years of free trade agreements, a capitalist global food system has decreased the market value of many agricultural commodities and ultimately set the wage floor to the lowest paid farm workers in the world. Partial exemptions under Ontario labour law have excluded agricultural workers from minimum wage laws and other key labour protections. Under these conditions, it is no wonder why many Ontarians are reluctant to perform highly skilled, physically demanding, low-paid agricultural work.

**Without living wages/incomes we are unlikely to attract enough Ontarians willing to acquire the skills and dedicate their lives to agricultural production.**

If we want to open the doors to living-wage jobs and increase farm incomes in Canadian agriculture without tariffs or other protective market mechanisms, then even more government support is needed. **Farm labour grants and wage subsidies, improved access to EI, and ideally a Basic Income are urgently required to ensure farm workers and operators are receiving a decent annual income regardless of their hourly wage, farm earnings, or the length of their season.**

Common values and a positive team culture on Ontario's small and mid-sized farms have continued to attract aspiring farmers. But they are unlikely to stay or become the next generation of farm operators unless we deal with the financial precarity of those who grow our food.

## Recommendations

The recommendations arising from the NFU-O Farm Labour Project are clustered in two sections. The first, **“Building Farm Employer and Farm Worker Capacity,”** suggests measures that farmers, farm organizations, community groups, eaters, and other stakeholders can take to support and grow Ontario's agricultural workforce.

The second, **“Municipal, Provincial, and/or Federal Support and Legislation,”** provides key policy recommendations directed at elected officials and all levels of government. The implementation of these policies will support the essential work of Ontario's small and mid-sized farms.

## Building Farm Employer and Farm Worker Capacity

- **Provide Human Resources (HR) Training for Farm Operators:** Though they are experts in growing food and managing livestock, small and mid-sized farm operators often do not have the time, or the knowledge, to adequately hire, manage, and retain workers. Offering farm operators specific training in working with staff and providing related templates and resources tailored to the needs of small and mid-sized farms would benefit operators and workers by fostering healthy, transparent, accountable, and safe workplaces.
- **Promote Best Practices for Farm Employers:** A majority of farm operators and workers stressed that matching farm values, and a good management style or team culture, creates a positive and attractive work environment. On-farm meals and free or discounted produce were also strong enticements for new and returning workers. Although few farms offered profit-sharing/ownership stakes or a supplementary health and dental plan, workers shared that such practices would play a factor in their pursuit of a long-term agricultural career. Promoting these and other “best practices” and encouraging their adoption on other farms will help small and mid-sized farmers attract Ontarians who are motivated by factors beyond financial remuneration.
- **Fund Training Programs for New Farmers and Farm Workers:** Over 70% of farm workers acquired their agricultural skills from on-farm training. Educational offerings are especially prevalent on rural small and mid-sized farms and on urban non-profit community farms. Programs like Ignatius Farm’s online New Farmer Training Program currently lack stable funding in spite of meeting a real need in the agricultural sector.
- **Support Co-operative Initiatives:** Less than 5% of farms surveyed were co-operatives, but almost 13% would consider forming a co-operative. Over 48% of workers were interested in co-operative farming. Given the financial constraints on farm operators and staff, it is recommended that farm organizations work closely with Local Food and Farm Co-ops (LFFC) to support farmers wishing to start or transition to co-operative models.
- **Improve Farmland Protection and Access:** The need to protect farmland from development and protect small and mid-sized farms from being absorbed by large corporate agribusinesses is crucial to addressing the farm income and living-wage farm labour crises. Mortgage and debt payments create barriers for farmers to hire. Over 64% of farm workers shared that skyrocketing land prices are preventing them from accessing land. Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) face additional barriers to accessing land and achieving food sovereignty for their communities. Allying with the Ontario Farmland Trust and generating land-linking, land-sharing, and succession opportunities between retiring and aspiring farmers will help protect farmland and create pathways for experienced agricultural workers to become the next generation of farmers.
- **Organize All Farm Workers under the Agricultural Employee Protection Act (AEPA):** Almost three-quarters of farm operators were in favour of granting farm workers the right to unionize. Although the AEPA only grants workers the right to associate, it is recommended that union-friendly farm employers encourage their staff to associate under the AEPA and that farm workers on small and mid-sized farms develop relationships with fellow labourers in corporate agriculture, and work with unions and migrant rights groups to build their collective strength. A unified voice for workers will strengthen capacity to promote shared interests in fair wages, local food, food security, land stewardship, and healthy livelihoods for all.
- **Increase Consumer Awareness of the Undervaluing of Agricultural Labour:** During the pandemic, many Ontario consumers realized that agricultural labour was essential skilled work. Almost two-thirds of farm operators and workers would like politicians, farm organizations, and other stakeholders to support a popular movement promoting fair food prices to mitigate farm income insecurity and low pay.

## Municipal, Provincial, and/or Federal Support and Legislation

- **Increase and Enhance Farm Labour Grants for Small and Mid-sized Farm Operations:** Approximately 40% of both farm operators and workers think that government should prioritize access to farm labour grants and subsidies. Many called for the extension of age qualifications and contract durations for Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) and the Youth Employment and Skills Program (YESP). Some respondents also wished to see the CSJ and YESP provide a “living wage” and not just the Ontario minimum.
- **Overhaul Temporary Foreign Worker Programs:** Over two-thirds of farm operator respondents agree with migrant-led movements on the need for permanent status for migrant workers. There is a strong contingent of farmers who are keen to see a variety of labour rights extended to TFWs.
- **Enact Universal Paid Sick Days:** Labour disruptions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear to farm operators and workers of the need for permanent paid sick days for all workers, including farm operators.
- **Offer a Basic Income (BI):** Almost 37% of farm operators and 67% of farm labourers consider a BI to be a top priority to protect farm workers and operators from financial insecurity. In the absence of protective market mechanisms, a BI would ensure a decent annual income regardless of hourly wages, farm earnings, or the seasonality of production.
- **Improve Employment Insurance (EI) Access:** Resident and migrant farm workers alike pay into EI through payroll deductions, but they either have difficulty accessing or are barred from accessing this benefit. Decreasing the insurable hours for farm workers to qualify for EI access and extending EI to migrant workers, even after they have left Canada for the season, would fairly offer workers needed income insurance.
- **Ease Building Codes to Support On-Farm Housing:** Over 38% of farm workers and 26% of farm employers called on county and municipal governments to ease building codes that limit on-farm housing, while maintaining regulations to prevent large developments on agricultural-zoned land.

## Introduction: Unpaid, Low-Paid, and ‘Unfree’ Labour – Reframing the Farm Labour Crisis

The Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) estimates that by 2029, nearly 47,300 agricultural jobs—two in five—will be left unfilled by resident workers in Ontario’s agricultural sector.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety around an agricultural labour shortage in the province is not a new phenomenon.

“There has been a farm labour shortage in North America for 300 years. This is a systemic problem tied to the basic economic underpinnings of our society.”  
– Farm Operator (FO) Respondent

As a settler colony, Canada was founded on a combination of resource extraction and agricultural production. Mobilizing a seasonal workforce to cultivate and harvest crops has been a perennial challenge in establishing and building the country. In other industries, labour shortages, when combined with collective and organized action by workers, led to increased wages, better working conditions, and the introduction of labour laws to protect workers’ rights.

The agricultural sector followed a different path. To produce food for both Ontario eaters and for export, the agricultural sector has consistently relied on a combination of **unpaid, low-paid, and “unfree” labour**.

From the earliest homesteads to the present day, the **unpaid labour** of women and children on the “family farm” has been taken for granted. Their free labour is a cost not calculated in the price of food at the farm gate, or on grocery shelves. More recently, some farms have offered unpaid internships. Although there are important non-economic motivations for farm internships, this new form of unpaid labour has arisen in part because fewer family members are available, or willing, to work for free.

Unlike most other types of employment in the province, agricultural work has never been regulated by minimum wage laws. **Low-paid work** is endemic to the agricultural sector. The unemployed, the precariously employed, and newly arrived immigrants have traditionally been the primary labour pool for seasonal agricultural work, especially

during the harvest season. Historically, when the local labour supply has lacked those willing to take low-paying, seasonal, and often back-breaking work, the corporate farm lobby, in conjunction with government, has imported the unemployed from across North America and/or the United Kingdom. Prior to the 1960s, the state also periodically enticed waves of immigrants to fill farm labour shortages with the promise of Canadian citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

Enticement and worker desperation have not consistently filled the labour gap. “**Unfree**” labour has always been crucial to the agricultural sector. Unfree labourers can be defined as any workers who are unable to freely circulate in the labour market. In the nineteenth century, farm workers in Upper Canada/Ontario were subordinates under a master and servant regime and were criminalized if they breached their work contracts.<sup>3</sup> During World War II, Japanese war interns were forcibly relocated to work on large sugar beet farms in Southwestern Ontario. Cree youth from Northern Ontario were compelled to labour on corporatized farms in the post-war era. Up until 1965, the able-bodied unemployed were cut off social assistance if they refused harvest work on local farms. In 1966, after the corporate agricultural lobby complained of a labour shortage, the first migrant workers arrived in Ontario under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). For the past 55 years, migrant workers have been promoted as the cheap and reliable “fix” to a farm labour crisis. By 2017, 29,300 temporary foreign workers (TFWs) laboured on Ontario farms, the equivalent of 30% of the total agricultural workforce in the province.<sup>4</sup> Because migrant workers are restricted to work for a single employer and lack myriad labour protections and rights, they are the most recent form of “unfree labour” on which much of the sector depends.

The reliance on unpaid, low-paid, and unfree labour, and the absence of standard labour rights for agricultural labourers, makes much of the cry of “farm labour shortages” ring hollow; it is not the quantity of workers, but the precarity of the work, that might better explain the lack of worker participation in the sector. However, we should not treat the labour concerns on all Ontario agricultural operations equally. Among small and mid-sized farms, where profit margins are extremely low to non-existent, operators are themselves low-income workers.

The **farm labour crisis** on small and mid-sized farms can only be understood in the context of the **farm income crisis**. Since 2000, Canadian farm debt has doubled, and “agribusiness corporations that supply fertilizers, chemicals, machinery, fuels, technologies, services, credit, and other materials and services have captured 95% of all farm revenues, leaving farmers just 5%.”<sup>5</sup> It is from this tiny share of farm revenue that farmers have to not only pay themselves, but also their workers.

Large corporate agribusinesses experience labour shortages differently. They have seen their land size, market share, and profits increase over the past two decades, often at the expense of the farm workers upon whose labour they depend. Their growth has also cut into the economic viability of small and mid-sized farm operations, which are crucial to ensuring food security in the province.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been little evidence of a general labour shortage. In fact, if anything, a wave of shutdowns has increased the number of jobseekers. If those without work have opted for the temporary Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) over farm employment, as frustrating as this may be for some farm operators, it says more about the devaluing of agricultural labour than it does about the work ethic of Canadians. What appears as a labour shortage is often just the product of corporate agribusiness declining to pay workers a fair wage for their skill and effort. To paraphrase the *Field of Dreams* (1989) mantra, “if you pay well, they will come.”

Small and mid-sized farms are essential for local food security and creating a sustainable food system—one that ensures that people can eat sufficiently and nutritiously for generations to come. Unfortunately, the labour required to maintain and reproduce these operations has been devalued. The National Farmers Union – Ontario’s (NFU-O) Farm Labour Project has found that there is plenty of work on these farms. There are also plenty of people who are attracted to the work and the rural lifestyle.

**There is, however, a shortage of living-wage agricultural jobs.**<sup>6</sup> This shortage negatively affects working farm operators, their current and potential employees, and the rural communities where they are located. **Decades of reliance on unpaid, low paid, and unfree labour has also shrunk the pool of skilled and experienced Ontarian farm workers.** Even if farmers were legislated to pay all their



workers \$20+/hour tomorrow, it would take years to cultivate and train a resident workforce capable of meeting the needs of farmers in rural areas across the province.

“The global capitalist food system dictates food pricing that is not reflective of the true cost of food.” – FO Respondent

The farm income crisis and the shortage of living-wage agricultural jobs are global problems. Any increase in food prices to accommodate better wages and farm incomes for Ontario growers will increase the demand for *imported* food. Almost thirty years of free trade agreements have placed a ceiling on all Ontario farm incomes and wages. In a capitalist global food system, the wage floor is ultimately set by the lowest paid farm workers in the world. In fact, it is largely the devaluing of farm labour across the globe that has created the conditions in which experienced farm workers from the Caribbean, Mexico, and elsewhere are willing to leave their families and enter restrictive labour contracts with substandard labour rights in Canada.

Farm operators, workers, and other stakeholders who participated in this study were less occupied with the question, “How do we solve the farm labour shortage?” than they were in trying to stay financially afloat without devaluing the labour required for their reproduction. They wished to explore the thornier problem posed by the economic and environmental geographer, Michael Ekers: What does “labour justice” mean for small-scale “commodity producers that are incredibly precarious themselves?”<sup>7</sup>

What follows is a report on the findings of the NFU-O’s Farm Labour Project, funded through an Ontario Labour Market Partnership (OLMP) and administered by Employment Ontario. The report concludes with recommendations to support the labour needs of hard-working small and mid-sized farm operators and the employment/ownership aspirations of Ontario’s next generation of growers.

## Methodology

This mixed-methods study included surveys of Ontario farm operators and farm workers, stakeholder consultations, informal interviews, online group discussions, and a literature review. The study took place between April 2020 and March 2021.<sup>8</sup>

## DEFINITIONS

### Small and mid-sized farms:

Refers to farms that typically employ under 20 paid workers (including farm operators), have less than 399 acres under cultivation, and/or have a net operating income of less than \$500,000.

### Farm Operator (FO):

Refers to person(s) responsible for the management decisions on an agricultural operation.

### Farm Employer:

Refers to any farm operator who employs any paid or unpaid non-familial employees.

### Farm Worker (FW):

Refers to any paid or unpaid farm employee who is engaged in primary agricultural production (planting crops, cultivating, pruning, feeding, and caring for livestock), harvesting, and/or is otherwise engaged in the day-to-day operations of an agricultural enterprise.

## Surveys: High Response and Completion Rate

All surveys were designed with SurveyMonkey and developed in consultation with small and mid-sized farmers and other stakeholders. **A total of 772 unique respondents participated in the three surveys.** All surveys were advertised in NFU-O e-newsletters and social media, and by rural stakeholders and other non-profit farm and food organizations.

An online farm operator survey of 43 questions was released in April 2020. It remained open until March 2021 and garnered 132 responses. Farmers who were not members of the NFU-O were encouraged to participate. The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO) also released the survey to their

members. The CFFO shared the non-identifiable data they gathered from 51 respondents. **The farm operator survey had an 85% completion rate.**

To increase farm operator participation, a refined farm operator phone survey of 38 questions began in November 2020. It remained open until March 2021. The Farm Labour Project team called over 1,000 farm operators. These operators were either NFU-O members or farms identified as employing staff. **The farm operator phone survey garnered 473 responses.** Because it was completed with project team assistance, **the phone survey had a 99% completion rate.** This phone calling strategy also served as a semi-structured interview, with many participants adding significant details that would not have otherwise been captured in survey responses.

A farm worker survey of 80 questions was released in July 2020. Survey design meant that most workers were directed to answer under 40 questions. It remained open until March 2021.<sup>9</sup> **The farm worker survey garnered 116 unique responses with an 81% completion rate.**

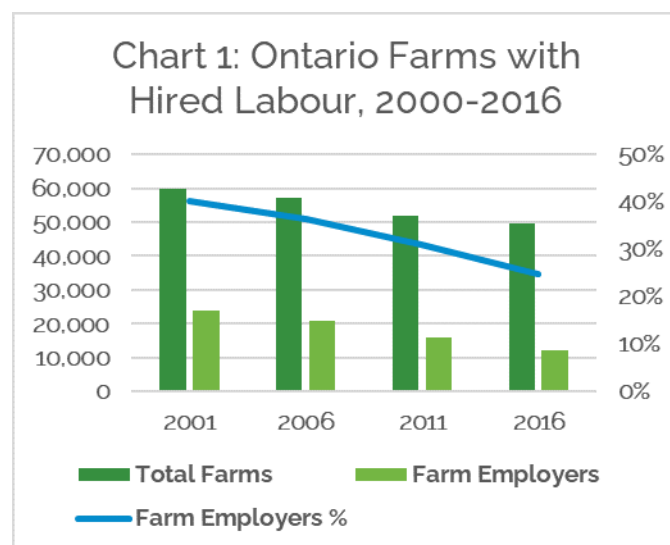
## Labour Market Information and Literature Review: Towards a Holistic Understanding of the Farm Labour Situation on Small and Mid-Sized Farms

There are a few studies that address the labour needs and concerns of small and mid-sized farms in Ontario. In 2011, the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) published labour market information on small farms across Canada.<sup>10</sup> Important research has been conducted on unpaid internships on small agroecological farms.<sup>11</sup> There is also extensive scholarship on the growing dependency on, and the legalities, treatment, and conditions of, legal and undocumented migrant farm workers in Canada and around the world.<sup>12</sup> Although driven by the concerns raised by project participants, the NFU-O Farm Labour Project's methodology and analysis was also informed by this secondary research. Where applicable, secondary research has been incorporated into the project's results and findings. In particular, as many farmer participants wanted to know more about historical conditions that have led to reliance on unpaid, low paid, and unfree labour in the agricultural sector, research on this topic has been interspersed with the survey findings.<sup>13</sup> Finally, labour market information derived

from Statistics Canada offered quantitative data to compare against the project's survey samples.

## Setting the Scene: The Farm Income Crisis and the Decline of Small and Mid-Sized Farms

It is important to understand the current context of agricultural labour on Ontario farms. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of Ontario farms decreased by 17%. During this same period, the number of farms with hired labour decreased by 15.4%. By 2016, less than 25% of Ontario farms employed paid staff (see Chart 1).<sup>14</sup> Paid farm work is increasingly concentrated in large corporate agribusiness with gross farm receipts above \$500,000.



The decrease in total number of farms and farms employing labour came largely at the expense of small and mid-sized farms.

As Table 1 indicates, in 2019, the “average” small farm with revenue under \$50,000 was operating at a loss, and those with revenue under \$250,000 were barely making ends meet. High operating costs and low net farm incomes place a ceiling on the remuneration that small and mid-sized farms can pay out to themselves and their workers. This does not mean that small farms are inherently unprofitable – rather it is an indication of how a cheap food policy, combined with government subsidy programs that privilege large operations, have undermined local, small and mid-sized food producers.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1: Ontario Average Net Farm Operating Income and Expenses, 2019<sup>16</sup>**

Revenue Class 2019	Net Operating Income	Crop Exp.	Livestock Exp.	Machinery Exp.	General Exp.	Salary/Wage Exp.
< \$10k	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
\$10k-\$25k	-\$3,968	10.99%	17.26%	21.44%	50.31%	1.23%
\$25k-50k	-\$274	17.67%	14.64%	17.85%	49.84%	2.08%
\$50-\$100k	\$6,877	21.56%	13.42%	15.49%	49.53%	3.12%
\$100k-\$250k	\$25,121	23.51%	14.24%	13.35%	48.90%	5.59%
\$250k-\$500k	\$62,180	20.20%	20.94%	11.22%	47.65%	7.76%
\$500k-\$1000k	\$123,324	16.97%	27.96%	9.12%	45.95%	9.25%
\$1000k-\$2000k	\$253,876	16.77%	28.78%	8.11%	46.34%	11.05%
>\$2000k	\$842,678	16.90%	30.25%	5.01%	47.84%	16.79%

A lack of income is not a problem for farms with revenue exceeding \$500,000. With lower proportional crop, machinery, and general expenses, farm operations with higher revenue are perfectly capable of paying a living wage. By not doing so, they contribute to the overall devaluing of essential farm work.

“ In the farming community there are haves and have-nots. Large farms can access government programs because they have both office support AND the ears of local politicians... this creates the dichotomy and 'bad press' for smaller, more intimate farms. The paternalistic drawl of large farms suggesting smaller farms don't make money is inaccurate and creates a false narrative...[Plus] many large farm corporations do little for the community other than spend money and that is hollow. Having voices for smaller farms is very important. ”  
 – FO Respondent

## Results

### Survey: Who Took Part

#### Farm Operators: The Need to Support New, Young, and Middle-Aged Farm Employers

The farm operator surveys included 656 unique agricultural operations, representing 1,144 farm operators. Of these operations, 62.5% relied solely on the paid and unpaid labour of farm operators and their family members. The other 37.5%, or 246

farms, employed non-family paid and/or unpaid staff. The sample accounts for 1.3% of the 49,600 farms in the province and represents approximately 2% of all farm workers.<sup>17</sup>

Tables 2 and 3 break down the survey sample by number of farm operators per farm, and by gender and age. There were almost 20% more farms with two or more operators in the sample compared to the 2016 census. There was also 10% better gender parity compared to all Ontario farms.<sup>18</sup> The data set confirms that the average age of Ontario farmers is 55 and over. However, farm employers in the sample skewed younger, with 57% under 55. **Many farm operators stressed the need to provide resources to support new, young, and middle-aged farm employers.**

**Table 2: Farm Operators by Number of Operators and Gender<sup>19</sup>**

Farm Operators & Gender	Survey Sample	Ontario-wide (2016)
Single Operators	21.8%	40.3%
Two+ Operators	78.2%	59.7%
Male	60.8%	70.3%
Female	38.5%	29.7%
Non-Binary	0.7%	N/A

**Table 3: Farm Operators by Age**<sup>20</sup>

Farm Operator Age	Farm Operator Sample	Farm Employer Sample	Ontario-wide (2016)
Under 35	10.8%	17.7%	9.4%
35-54	35.7%	39.0%	35.5%
55+	53.6%	43.3%	55.1%

### Farm Workers: Acknowledging Barriers of Access to Agricultural Participation

The farm worker survey obtained 116 unique respondents. Over 93% identified as white and a majority (57%) were white women. Although respondents ranged in age from under 18 to over 65, the majority (52%) were between 25 and 34. **A lack of diversity in the farm worker sample is reflective of the Ontario agricultural sector as a whole.**

Black farmers and food sovereignty activists have exposed how racialized peoples have been excluded and restricted from farm ownership in North America. They have also revealed how the absence of fresh and affordable food in racialized urban communities amounts to what food justice activist Karen Washington calls “food apartheid.” Organizations like Black Creek Community Farm in Toronto are playing a leading role in the Black food sovereignty movement. A parallel effort by Indigenous leaders like Dawn Morrison (Secwepemc), Director of the Indigenous Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, has made food sovereignty a key aspect of decolonial efforts on Turtle Island.

Allied farmers and farm workers can support these efforts. Connecting farm operators with urban farms and gardens, where there is far greater ethnic diversity among staff and volunteers, and a good deal of Indigenous and non-Western agricultural knowledge and practice, would be an effective way to share knowledge and support food sovereignty for all communities. In time, these relationships could also lead to greater access to land and non-urban farming models for everyone, including racialized, Black, and Indigenous growers, many of whom have had their ancestral land or farming livelihoods taken by colonization, climate change, and economic imperatives to migrate to Canadian cities.

“ Farm work is the most fulfilling work I've ever done. I hope the way towards a livable farming future becomes more available for all types of people, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, immigrants, and others who have even more barriers to accessing land, training, and farm jobs. ”  
– Farm Worker (FW) Respondent

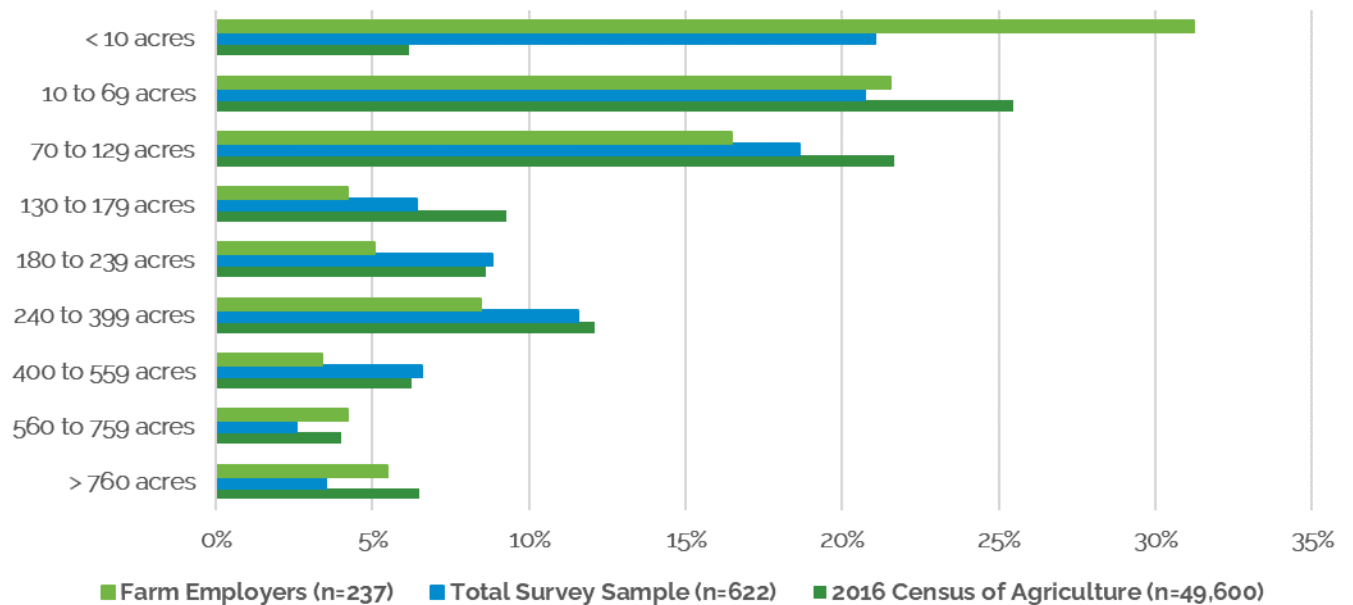
### Farm Size: Small Farms are Job Creators

A primary aim of this project was to identify the labour issues on small and mid-sized farms in Ontario. In 2016, the average farm size in Ontario was 249 acres.<sup>21</sup> Our sample represents considerably smaller farms, with a mean acreage of between 70 to 129 acres.

The Farm Labour Project has found that **smaller farms are job creators and are much more likely to be employing people.** Although farms under 70 acres represented 42% of the sample, they represented almost 53% of all farm employers. **Farms under 70 acres employed 77% of all paid interns, 68% of all unpaid interns/volunteers, and 49% of all paid staff.**<sup>22</sup>

Chart 2 compares the average farm sizes of survey respondents with the 2016 Census of Agriculture.<sup>23</sup> The percentage of survey respondents with over 180 acres roughly correlates to the latest census. However, our sample slightly underrepresents farms between 130 and 179 acres in comparison with census data. Conversely, and befitting a study on small farms, our sample overrepresents farmers with under 10 acres by a factor of almost 4 to 1.<sup>24</sup>

Chart 2: Farm Size Comparison - Sample Total, Farm Employers & 2016 Census of Agriculture



The average Ontario farm size increased by 83% from 2000 to 2016. The value of an acre of Ontario farmland almost tripled between 2000 and 2019, to an average of \$11,446/acre.<sup>25</sup> Farm consolidation and increased landholdings came primarily at the expense of mid-sized farms. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of Ontario farms between 70 and 759 acres decreased by one third, while farms over 760 acres increased by a comparable percentage. Although farmers with less than 70 acres felt the effects of rising land prices, they were slightly less likely than mid-sized farms to have been swallowed up by corporate buyers. In fact, farms under 70 acres have shown a modest increase of 7% since the beginning of the twenty-first century. **Because smaller farms disproportionately employ more workers and offer more training and educational opportunities via paid and unpaid internships and volunteer experience, they are crucial to addressing farm labour shortages in the province.**

“ A lot of farm labour issues are connected to industrial ag and rural living exclusive to wealthy retirees and not young families who could be a viable asset to the workforce. ”  
 – FO Respondent

### Farm Type: Mixed Vegetable-Livestock Farms are Key Sector Employers

**The survey found that mixed vegetable-livestock farmers are key sector employers.** Farm production types more typical for smaller land sizes dominate the overall sample. As Table 4 shows, the sample overrepresents almost all types of animal and crop production in comparison to the 2016 Census of Agriculture. Mixed vegetable-livestock farms dominated the sample, with a mean of at least two production types per farm (n=639). Although many of the farm worker respondents were on mixed crop-livestock farms, the majority (79%) were engaged primarily in outdoor vegetable production (n=116).

**Table 4: Ratio of Sample to 2016 Census of Agriculture by Farm Type (%)<sup>26</sup>**

Farm Type	Ratio
Vegetable and melon farming	9:1
Sheep and goat farming	6:1
Poultry and egg farming	5:1
Hog and pig farming	4:1
Fruit and tree nut farming	3:1
Greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture	2:1
Cattle ranching	2:1
Other animal production	1:1
Other crop farming	1:1
Oilseed and grain farming	1:1

### Operating Arrangement: Non-Corporate OAs Dominate and Growing Interest in Co-operatives

The operating arrangement of farm operator respondents also differs from the 2016 Census (see Table 5). In particular, “partnership[s] with a written agreement” and with “other operating arrangements,” including co-operative farming models, are overrepresented in the sample. The survey data also captured fewer incorporated farms. The survey sample represents the operating arrangements more common among small and mid-sized farms.

**Table 5: Operating Arrangement<sup>27</sup>**

Operating Arrangement	Sample (n=636)	2016 Census (n=49,600)
Sole proprietorship	54.40%	51.59%
Partnership without a written agreement	13.84%	21.49%
Partnership with a written agreement	17.45%	4.86%
Family corporation	11.79%	20.03%
Non-family corporation	1.10%	2.00%
Other operating arrangements	1.42%	0.03%

“We are very interested in joint ownership of farm enterprises and would like to do this in the future.” – FO Respondent

Among farm workers, 48% were actively seeking co-operative farming opportunities (n=92). **With land prices rising, the traditional operating arrangement of sole proprietorship on small and mid-sized farms is less viable for most prospective farmers. A co-operative culture may offer one solution.**

### Farm Location: An Even Distribution

Farm operator respondents were spread fairly equally across Ontario’s 19 counties, 3 united counties and 8 regional municipalities. At 6.3%, Grey County had the highest response rate while Niagara region, at 1.7%, had the lowest (n=651).

### Farms without Staff: Avoiding Labour Shortages through Family Self-Sufficiency

Almost 63% (n=656) of the farms surveyed did not employ staff in 2020. These survey respondents represent 1.8% of the approximately 37,295 Ontario farms that did not report having hired labour in the 2016 Census.

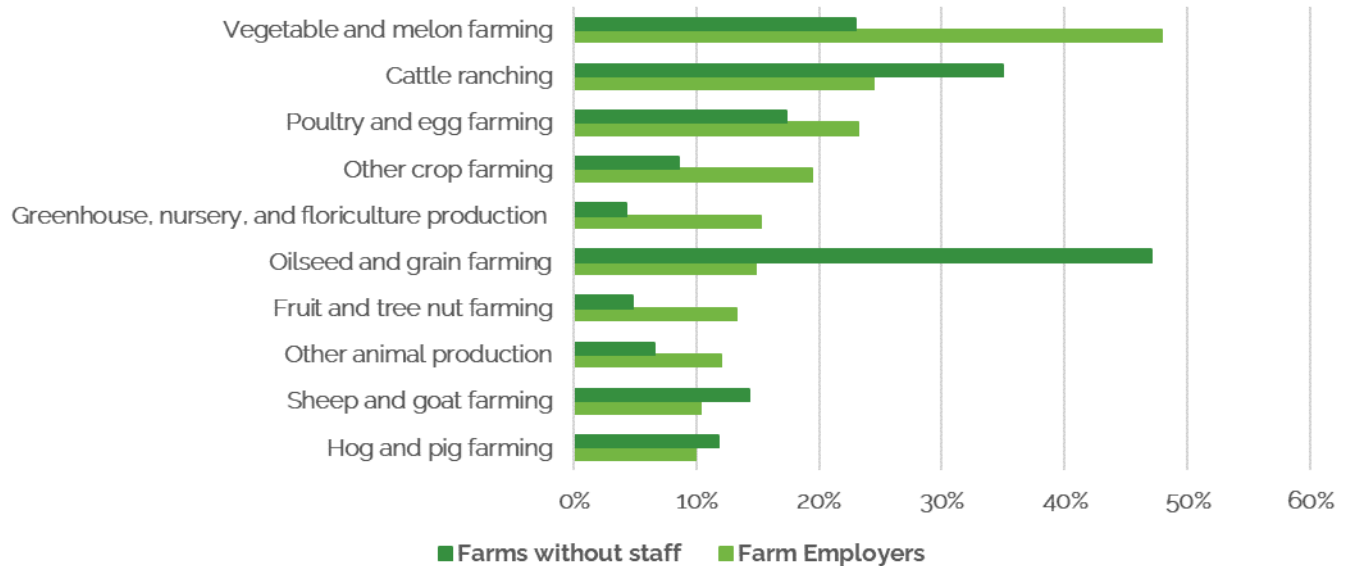
For the most part, farms without staff were concentrated in oilseed and grain farming (47%) and cattle ranching (35%) (n=397, see Chart 3). They were also slightly more likely to engage in single-commodity production than operations that employed staff.

Many of these farmers were employed full-time off farm. “We only break even on what we grow and we lose money on beef cattle,” said one farmer. “So off-farm income is critical and burnout is real. Which means something has to change, or we will stop trying to be a commercial food producer.”

Other farmers without staff mentioned that they occasionally hire or contract out casual work for odd jobs or to outsource custom grain combining. Others prefer to do even these jobs themselves.

A majority of 84% (n=343) of non-employer farms are self-sufficient and have no need for extra help. For these family-run farms, there are few concerns around agricultural labour shortages. They shared that they rely on their own labour to maintain their farm operations. “I enjoy the work of farming. I don’t want to end up being an office manager who

Chart 3: Farm Employers and Non-Employers by Farm Type



delegates tasks that I actually want to be doing myself,” said one non-employing agriculturalist.

Privacy and autonomy are values deeply shared by these independent farm operators. “I can’t trust staff to operate my expensive equipment properly,” said one grain operator. “If you do it yourself, then you know it’s done right.”

Many independent family farmers shared how they “choose to scale operations to what we can handle.” Some were previously employers who abandoned production types with high labour requirements (vegetable, tobacco). Other former farm employers said they were scaling back as they approached retirement.

The precarity of some non-employer farm operations has also dampened labour demand. One beekeeper shared that the problem is “not so much an inability to find workers, but an inability to fight against the forces that are causing failures in bee colonies.”

Complaints around the “red tape,” “regulations,” and “paperwork” to comply with labour regulations made some non-employer respondents wary of the time and expense required to employ staff. “Following labour regulations based on large scale agriculture is too difficult,” said one non-employer. Another was simply “unclear on how to hire” or what “labour regulations were applicable to hiring farm workers.”

For other farmers, not employing staff is an ethical decision. One cattle rancher and grain farmer

explained that they “had tried to scale up and become a large corporate farm, but it wasn’t a viable or sustainable option.” Another farmer said that they had employed unpaid interns over 10 years ago but “we found it was unethical, so we abandoned our market garden and switched to field crops.” Yet another non-employer believed the “abuse of labour by factory farms” made the idea of employing workers, even with better conditions and a living wage, “unsavory.”

Non-employers noted that a lack of skilled and committed workers (7%), labour seasonality (6%), and declining rural populations were barriers to them hiring, although these were not dominant factors (n=343). Instead, **a lack of farm profitability, (24%, n=375) was the number one reason non-employer farm operators who would like to hire staff had no paid workers.**

“I would like to be able to hire someone, but the margins are too tight,” said one farmer. “Investors buying up farms are squeezing out smaller operations.”

“We can’t compete with the wages offered in mining and mining-related trades,” said one Northern Ontario respondent. “We also can’t sell what our products are actually worth because of competition with large retailers like Costco and Walmart. If we can’t hire employees at a decent wage that recognizes their true value for their skill sets, then what’s the point?”

“A lack of profitability means that expansion is not on the radar for us,” said one farmer, “besides, we prefer to keep labour in the family.”

Despite the barriers to hiring, 1 in 10 farms without workers are considering employing staff in the future (n=362). Many of these future employers have just begun their farming careers and are preparing to expand their workforce beyond the family unit.

**Based on the total number of Ontario farms in the 2016 Census of Agriculture that did not employ labour, it is extrapolated from the survey sample findings that there are upwards of 3,700 farms in the province that are in the process of, or wish to, employ staff.** Of these potential farm employers, 2 in 5 are likely to be in a position where a lack of farm profitability is currently preventing them from hiring.

## Farms with Staff

Farmers that employed paid or unpaid interns, volunteers, paid staff, and/or temporary foreign workers (TFWs) account for 37.5% of the Farm Labour Project sample. Chart 4 breaks down employment relationships by the total number of farms and by the total number of workers in the survey sample. The following sections provide an analysis by each type of employment relationship. It should be noted that 25% of farm employers engaged workers in two or more of the four employment relationship types (n=246).

## Paid and Unpaid Interns and Volunteers: Small and Mid-Sized Farms are Knowledge Incubators

Over 5% of farms with staff employed paid interns. With an average of 3 paid interns per farm, paid interns account for approximately 12% of staff of all types in the farm operator survey sample.

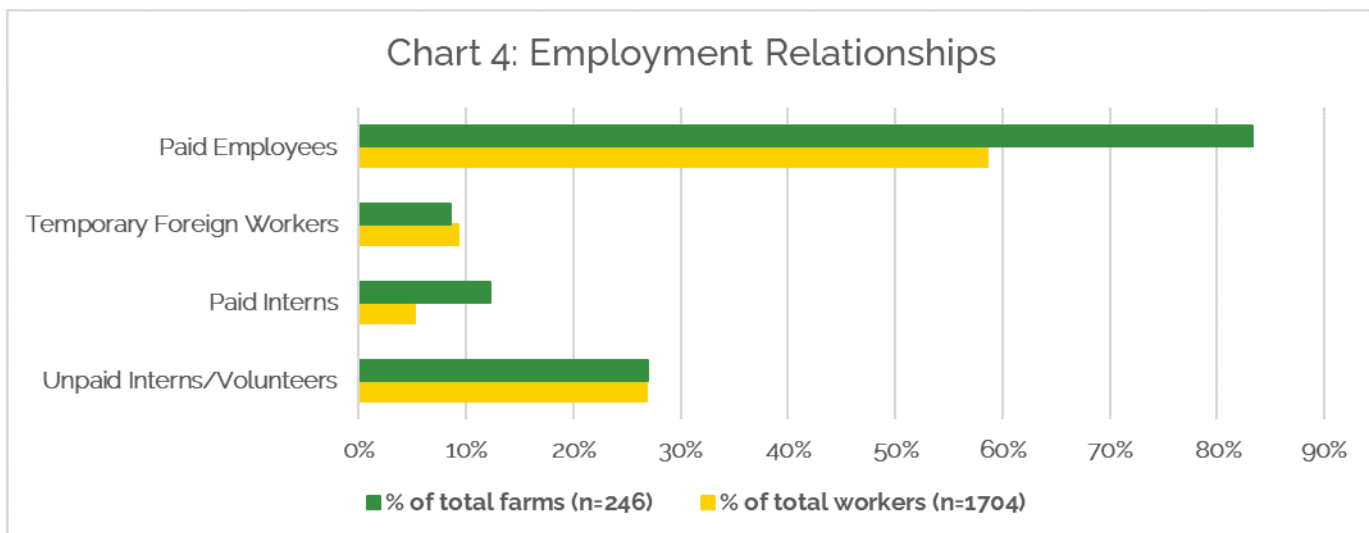
Just under 27% of farms with staff offered volunteer/unpaid intern opportunities. The total number of volunteers/unpaid interns account for 27% of total staff employed in the sample, an average of 7 volunteers/unpaid interns per farm.

Paid/unpaid interns and volunteers were primarily employed on small-scale vegetable farms (70% and 64% respectively).

## Paid Interns: One-Third of Paid Interns Receive a \$15/hour Wage

Farms under 70 acres were 3.3 times more likely to have paid interns than larger farms.

Over 90% of paid internships were either part-time or full-time seasonal positions and no paid interns were casually employed (Chart 5). This group of workers included those participating in formal farm training programs (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training – CRAFT network, Ignatius Farm New Farmer Training Program, etc.) and/or other farm-specific training.





Approximately **one-third of farms offered an hourly wage for their interns that averaged over \$15/hour.** The other two-thirds were paid a weekly or monthly stipend, with a low of \$100/month with room and board, to a high of \$1,000/month with room and board.

“We’ve had 5 interns for stints of 2 months each. It has been an entirely positive experience, with interns staying connected with our farm, coming back on weekends, and telling others of the opportunity to work/live here.” – FO Respondent

### Unpaid Internships/Volunteers: Casual Work Predominates

Farms under 70 acres are 2.3 times more likely to have unpaid interns and volunteer positions than larger farms.

**Over two-thirds (67%) of unpaid intern/volunteer positions were casual** (Chart 6). This group of workers included World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms participants (WWOOFers), one-time volunteers, community-supported agriculture (CSA) members, high school students, and family members.

Chart 5: Paid Interns by Employment Duration (n=89)

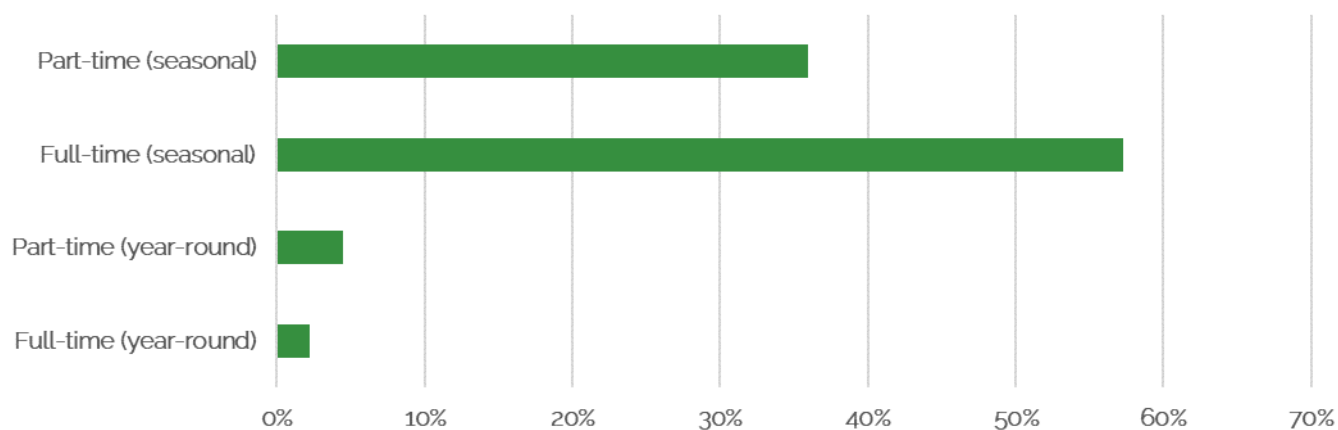
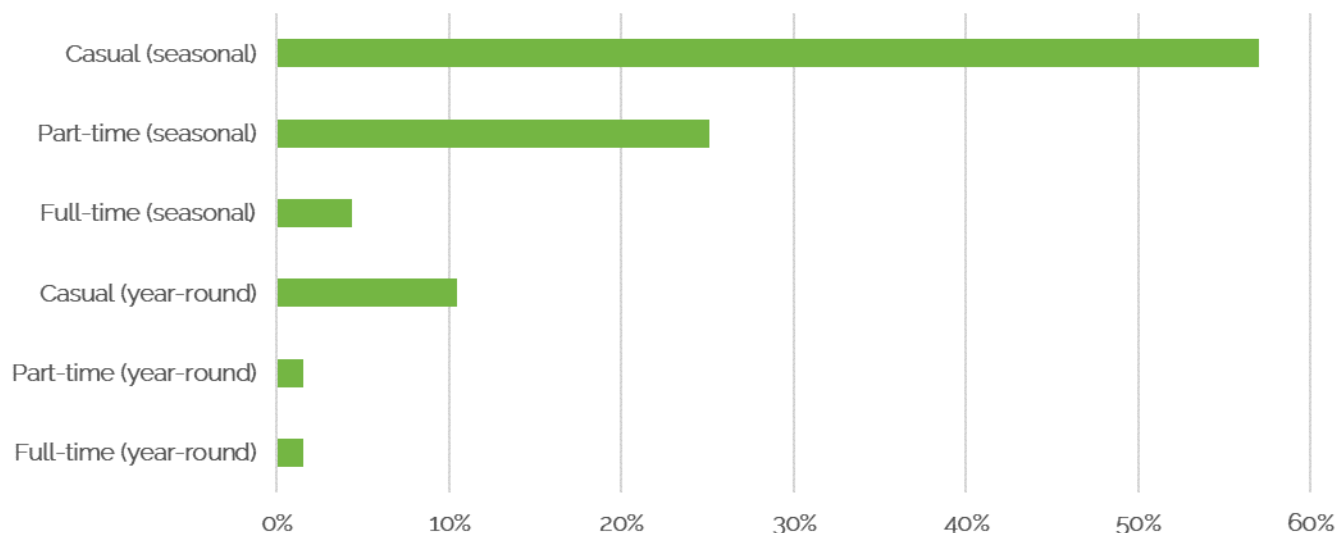


Chart 6: Unpaid Interns/Volunteers by Employment Duration (n=458)



Although these workers received no financial remuneration for their work, many received food (CSA shares, produce, meals), subsidized travel and/or free accommodation, and/or received access to garden plots and/or free seedlings, etc. for their personal home gardens.

## A Varied and Educational Experience for Interns and Volunteers

Paid interns accounted for only 5%—and unpaid interns/volunteers less than 8%—of total farm worker respondents.

Both paid/unpaid interns and volunteers were engaged in a variety of farm operations, including planting, harvesting, washing, and packing, often directly alongside the farm operator(s).

Unpaid interns in the farm worker sample laboured primarily on vegetable farms. They estimated an average of 30% of their worktime was devoted to training, 10% higher than their paid intern counterparts. Paid interns were slightly more likely than unpaid interns to work in excess of 44/hours a week.

## Unpaid Internships on the Decline on Small and Mid-Sized Farms

When Michael Ekers and Charles Z. Levkoe surveyed over 200 agroecological farms between 2013 and 2015, they found that almost two-thirds of workers on these farms were non-waged.<sup>28</sup> Although the Farm Labour Project survey sampled a broader, more diverse set of farms, it appears as though **reliance on unpaid/paid internships has been in decline** since their study, as **paid/unpaid interns and volunteers were less than 39% of all labour on surveyed farms**. And, far from exclusive reliance, over two thirds (68%) of farms with paid interns and over one half (51%) of farms with unpaid interns/volunteers also had paid staff. Farm employers confirmed this trend:

“ We wanted to attract stronger workers, this work is HARD and skilled, so we switched from interns to above minimum wage paid staff a few years ago. ” – FO respondent

“ We moved from interns and woofers to paid staff early on, as we knew work needed to be valued. However, as owners we didn't get minimum wage equivalent (including all in kind perks we could think of) for our own labour for many years. Making the next jump to above minimum for our staff (and us!) will take another few years to take the worst of the debt burden off the farm books. ” – FO respondent

There may well be a further decline in farm internships on small and mid-sized farms beyond 2021. **Among farm operator respondents with paid/unpaid interns, 27% reported they would like to shift to paid staff in the next five years.** Respondents shared the tension they felt between reliance on unpaid interns to maintain their low-profit farm businesses with the progressive aspirations to educate and build an alternative, sustainable, and just food movement. Internships, as Ekers has suggested, have not only replaced unpaid familial labour, but have also reduced dependency on chemicals and fossil fuels by engaging in more labour-intensive, but ecologically friendly farming techniques.<sup>29</sup> Not only that, many farm operators echoed the research on farm internships, arguing they were meeting a real need for on-farm education, and the reproduction of farm skills and ecological knowledge. The educational aspect of internships is explored in more detail on page 24.

## Temporary Foreign Workers: A Majority of Small and Mid-Sized Farm Operators Support Status for All

Migrant farm workers come to Canada through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) that comprises exclusive seasonal migration agreements with Mexico and many Caribbean countries, and through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program Agriculture stream, which includes workers from other countries. According to the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, in 2017, temporary foreign workers represented 30% of Ontario's total agricultural workforce.

The sample suggests that **there is far less reliance on migrant workers on small and mid-sized farms compared with the provincial average. Only 3% of farms with staff employed temporary foreign workers.** With an average of 8 TFWs per farm, they

account for approximately 8.5% of all employment types in the sample. However, almost 13% of farms surveyed are contemplating hiring TFWs (n=176).

“We are considering TFWs, but we are still working through the ethical dilemmas around the whole thing...” – FO Respondent

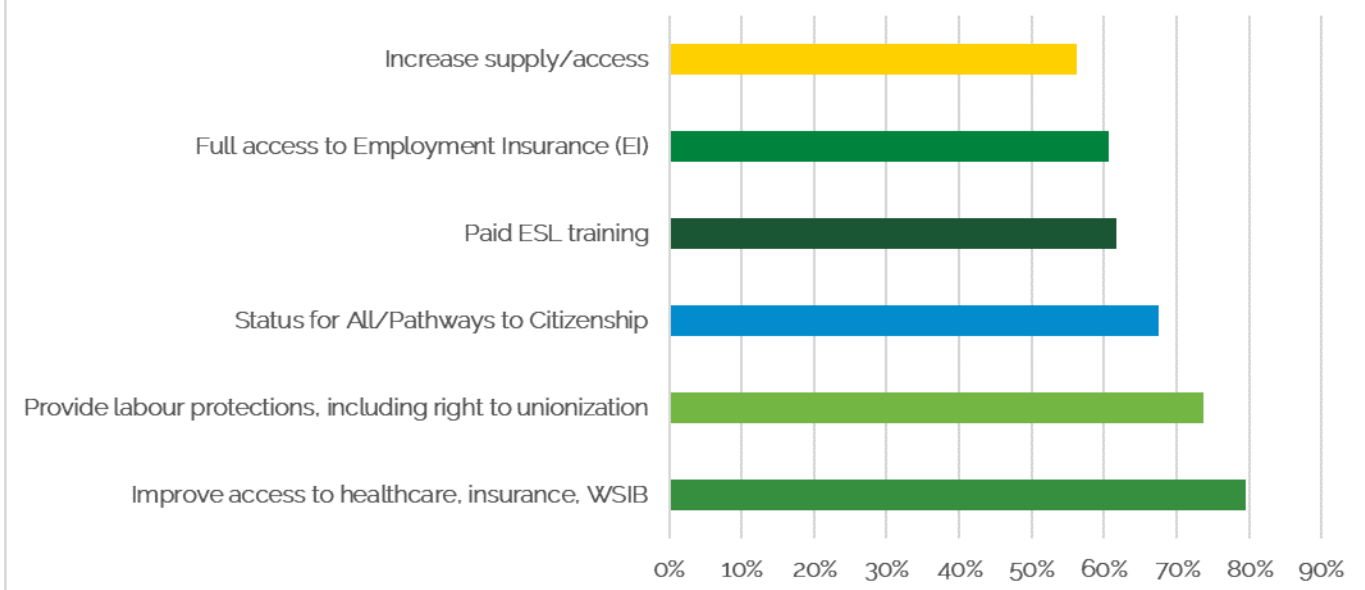
A number of TFW employers indicated they go above and beyond the legal requirements for migrant workers. Quality housing and access to vehicles topped the list of provisions above the bare minimum. Some paid for visits to naturopaths and massage therapists. One farm invites migrant women’s children to holiday in Canada. Several farm operators indicated they were supporting their workers’ applications for citizenship. Almost all stressed that they have fostered long-lasting personal relationships with migrant workers on their farms.

Two important reports on the status of agricultural migrant workers were released in the summer of 2020. The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC) published “Unheeded Warnings: Covid-19 & Migrant Workers in Canada” in June 2020. The lack of permanent resident status, closed work permits, low wages, and exemptions from the Employment Standards Act, MWAC argued, create exploitative and unsafe working conditions, and have made migrant

workers especially vulnerable during the pandemic.<sup>30</sup> In August 2020, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) published “The Status of Migrant Farm Workers in Canada, 2020” in which they traced thirty years of UFCW migrant farm worker advocacy and outlined how the lack of union representation, alongside substandard labour protections and rights, requires an entire overhaul of migrant worker programs and legislation.<sup>31</sup> MWAC and UFCW offered a list of recommendations and legislative reforms, not least of which were the end of closed work permits and permanent status upon arrival.

The reliance on temporary foreign workers on Ontario farms is a contentious issue and the responses received from the survey sample reflect that. Some farmers, including several who employ migrant workers, were adamant that programs like the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program are essential to meeting agricultural labour needs. Others believed the reliance on migrant workers contributed to low food prices and called for migrant worker programs to be scrapped. However, the majority of respondents echoed the calls of MWAC and UFCW for a fundamental overhaul of existing migrant worker programs (Chart 7). Approximately **two-thirds of farm operators were in favour of granting citizenship as well as labour rights and benefits to all migrant agricultural workers.**<sup>32</sup>

Chart 7: Farmers in Favour of TFW Program Changes (n=308)



Here is some of what farm operators shared regarding migrant workers:

“Citizenship should be prioritized for migrant farm workers...they are essential.”  
– TFW Farm Employer Respondent

“Farm labour is a very complex issue touching on personal values and motives, emotional values, socio-economic drivers, social perceptions and values regarding manual labour, and international trade pressures. The very existence of the TFWP is a key indicator of how little has changed in the world since the days of colonialism.” – FO Respondent

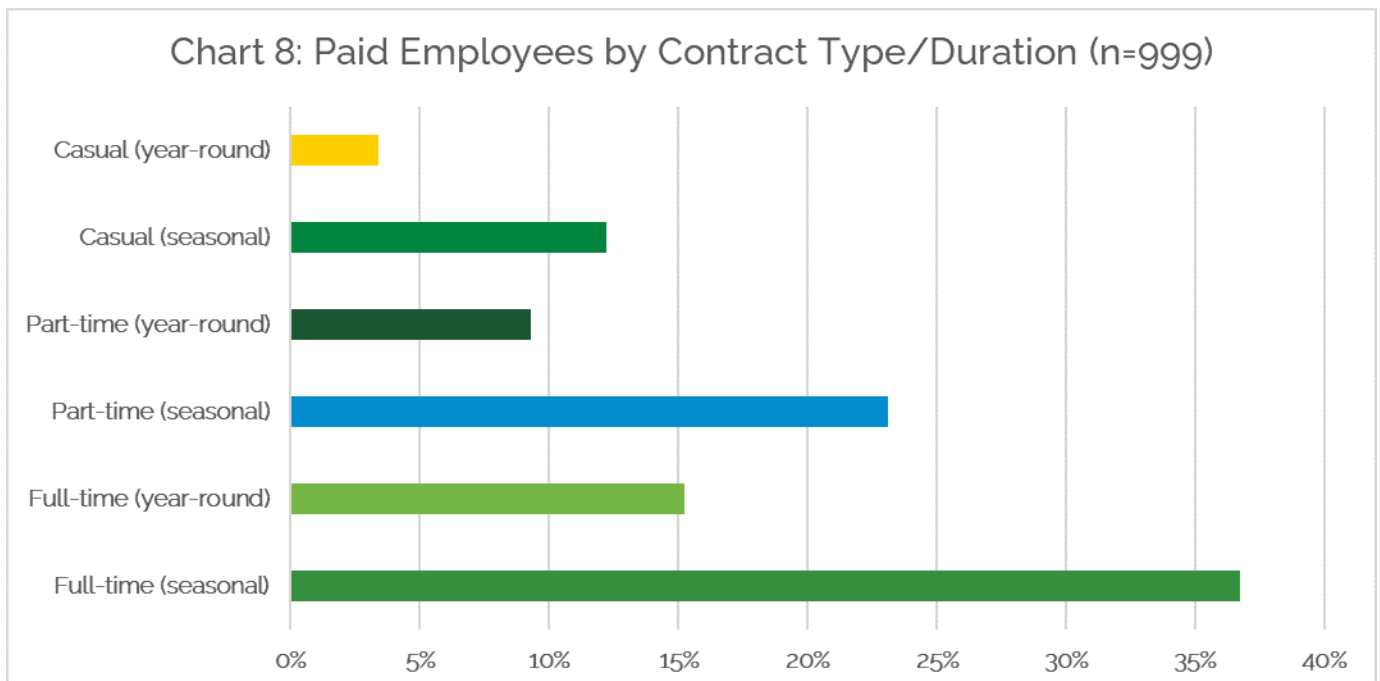
“I don't think migrant worker contracts should be tied to specific farmers. They should be able to quit and find work elsewhere in the program if they have a negative experience. The way it's organized presently is paternalistic and oppressive.” – FO Respondent

“I'm interested in connecting with other farmers who are active in the migrant worker rights movement. It has always felt hard to join as a farmer.” – FO Respondent

### **Paid Employees: Addressing Seasonality and Part-Time Work**

Over 83% of farms with staff employed paid Ontario resident workers (n=204). With an average of five paid employees per farm, waged workers account for approximately 59% of staff (n=999) of all types in the sample. Although farms under 70 acres represented only 42% of the sample, they employed almost half of the paid workers identified in this study.

Chart 8 breaks down paid employees by the duration of their contract. **Over 72% of paid employment in the sample was seasonal.** However, it is promising that **52% of waged work was full-time employment**, as this improves workers' ability to plan and organize their lives and have a secure income, and often enables them to access EI or find other employment during the off-season. Several farmers



shared they were committed to shifting more part-time work to full-time. Others are actively pursuing secondary farm enterprises to create year-round employment opportunities, a measure that almost 2 in 5 farm workers said would help keep them in the agricultural sector (n=92).

The majority (77%) of farm worker respondents were paid employees. Just under 63% of all paid farm workers were seasonal employees and 79% were full-time (n=89). They were equally weighted by seniority. Since the sample set included seasoned farm workers, it comes as no surprise that 52% were “lead hands” or supervisors and were involved to some degree in the management and training of new staff.

### Most Small and Mid-Sized Farms Pay Above the Statutory Minimum Wage

In spite of the fact that the statutory minimum wage in Ontario is not extended to agricultural workers, over **85% of employer respondents pay more than the current \$14.25 minimum** required by law for other types of work (n=196). Slightly more than half (52%) of employers indicated they try to provide a living wage and/or bonuses (n=190). The average wage reported by employers who paid above the minimum was \$17.58 (n=145).<sup>33</sup> The farm employer average wage roughly corresponds with the \$17.50 average reported by farm worker respondents (n=82). Paid agricultural workers shared that their farm wages accounted for roughly 78% of their annual incomes (n=102). Although rare and not legally required, 9% of farm employers have occasionally paid overtime in an effort to retain staff (n=124). Farm operators, on average, are spending 29% of their operating costs on staffing (n=163). In their own words:

“We are building up our farm from scratch... our line of credit has almost run out. If I could offer more pay, I think we could find and keep more employees... it's just hard when there's no money.” – FO Respondent

“There is no shortage of labour. Wages are just not on par with what workers are willing to accept.” – FO Respondent

“I do it because I love it but crappy wages for 7 1/2 mo/yr then 55% EI for the remainder is crippling me financially. My year round pay (Wage & EI) works out to approx. \$13/hr which I find criminally low. I try not to think too much about it or I get upset. Volunteers sometimes ask me if they should try farming but generally I don't recommend it unless they have very specific reasons or deep pockets.”  
– FW Respondent

### Paid Farm Employment Requires Diversified Skills and Knowledge

**Participants emphasized that farming is skilled, diversified work.** According to one farm operator:

“On a larger-scale, less diversified farm, employees might spend lots of time on repetitive tasks and require less training and skill. But our workers need to be quick and efficient to handle a diversified vegetable farm. They need to do customer service work, infrastructure set-up & maintenance (and much more) with dozens of different crops that change over the course of the season. It takes a full season to train a worker.”  
– FO Respondent

Indeed, farm workers described a dizzying array of responsibilities and tasks on small and mid-sized farms, including planting, weeding, watering, manuring, harvesting, animal care, milking, using and repairing machinery, packing, online and in-person sales, deliveries, and much more.

### Hiring, Retention, Education, and Employment Barriers Retention a Challenge and the Costs of Labour Shortages

Almost a third of farm employers “often” or “always” experience difficulties finding workers (see Chart 9). Over 61% of operators stressed that finding “qualified candidates” has been a challenge with 58% of employers having to hire candidates without the necessary experience or skills (n=124).

## Frequency of Labour Retention

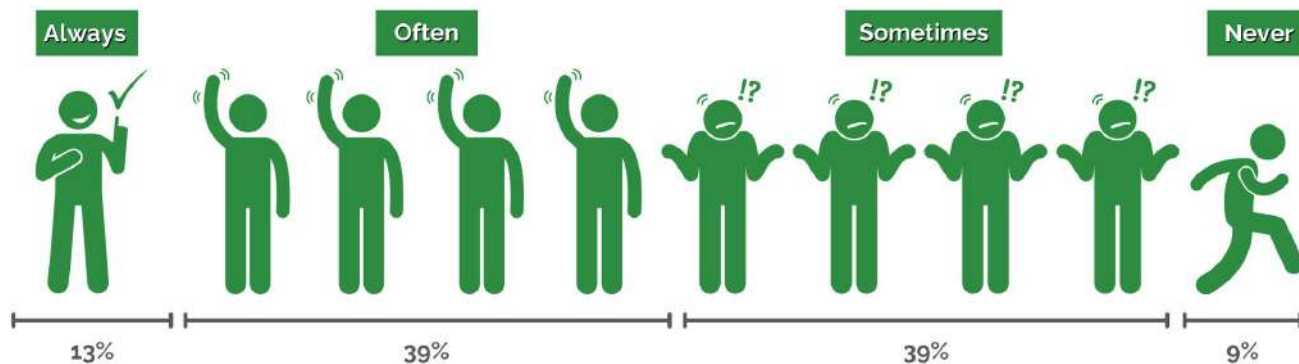
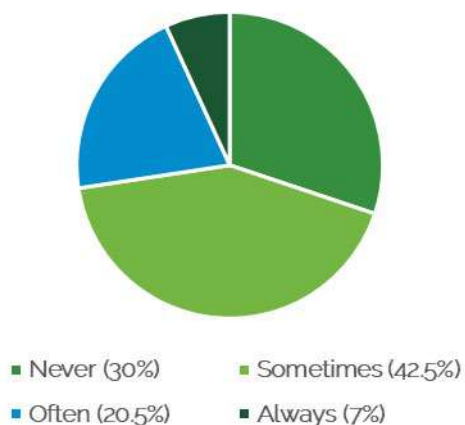


Chart 9: Frequency of Labour Shortages (n=219)



Many employers shared that **retention was an even greater challenge to the viability of their farm operations than a shortage of new workers**. Almost half said they “never” or only “sometimes” were able to keep employees beyond one season (see infographic above). In a follow-up question, **41% shared that over the past five years, they have had difficulty retaining workers from year to year** (n=124). To improve retention, a number of farmers reported that they offer higher wages to returning seasonal staff.

“The lack of retention (primarily, not being able to offer work for 5 months of the year and only underpaid work the other 7) makes the labour situation fairly unsustainable as a farm operator AND as a farm employee.” – FO Respondent

Farm employers described a variety of effects labour shortages and poor retention of staff have had on

their operations. Like many of the non-employed farm operators in our sample, employers have had to make difficult decisions to switch to less labour-intensive types of farming or abandon plans to expand (36%, n=124). Almost one quarter have scaled down or reduced the size of their operations. Important farm improvements and repairs are often postponed for lack of labour power. More than 31% reported difficulty building and maintaining infrastructure, and 1 in 5 felt that plans to make ecological or sustainability improvements had been delayed because they simply did not have the time (n=124).

The financial costs of precarious staffing were also highlighted, with 35% of farm employers reporting that they have lost revenue or been unable to harvest crops because they were short-staffed (n=124).

The anxiety of hiring and retaining staff has taken a toll on small and mid-sized farm operators, with over two-thirds indicating that because of labour inconsistencies, they have been overtired or experienced mental health stress or burnout (n=124).

“The only reason I am profitable is because I work constantly and continuously and do not give myself a wage. It is unsustainable. I have already had one major mental health crisis, but I love what I do so I persist...I am ready to expand but as one person simply cannot do more...I really do need help, but not sure where to start!” – FO Respondent

Despite an unfilled labour market that should make it easy to find a job, 41% of farm workers “sometimes” to “always” struggle to find agricultural work (n=80). In conversation, farm workers shared

that “internships are easy to find” but “permanent, full time, good paying agricultural jobs” are a rarity. Seasonal, contract jobs that pay a “living wage” are not readily available. Farm workers over 30 years old and with families stressed that there were many barriers and difficulties in securing work, and first-time farm hands told us that they were often overlooked for paid positions.

“It is challenging finding ‘livable’ farming work, I want to grow food, but the finances often don’t make sense. As a young person, it is continually challenging to believe that it’s possible to survive and thrive as a farmer. I’m still at it, because it’s in my bones, but I have always relied on off-farm work. I can handle short term situations where I do not earn enough money to save, but cannot devote a full-time life to that kind of financial instability.” – FW Respondent

### Employment Barriers: Low Wages Cannot be Underestimated

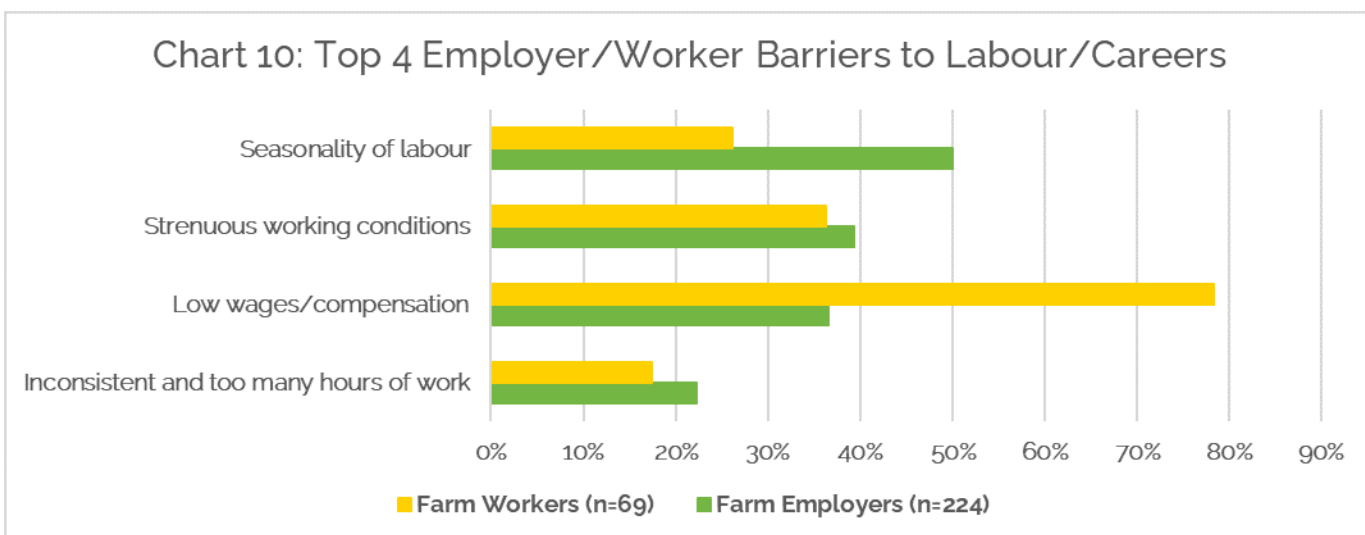
A variety of barriers to employment on small and mid-sized farms will be identified in the sections that follow. But, as Chart 10 indicates, wages, seasonality and hours of work, and strenuous conditions were the most commonly cited barriers to labour and careers. **Employers significantly overestimate the importance of seasonality as a barrier, and significantly underestimate the importance of low wages as a barrier.**

“When you know that while you barely make minimum wage that the farm operator is usually earning even less than you, it means there is a horrendous problem in agriculture.”  
– FW Respondent

Farm workers shared that living wages (60%), higher salaries for retention and skill level, and/or profit-sharing schemes (15%) would go a long way to encouraging them to pursue a long-term farming career (n=92).

### Recruitment Strategies: Word-of-Mouth Predominates

Part of the challenge of finding qualified workers is related to where employers are posting and advertising positions. **Over 85% of farm operators continue to rely on word-of-mouth, even though less than half of our farm worker sample said this was how they secured their jobs** (see Chart 11). A significant proportion of farm workers and employers connect via online job portals and/or social media. Local resources that may have once been important advertising sites, such as employment centres and newspaper classified sections are hardly ever used by employers, and never by the jobseekers. Connections with regional education-based co-op programs are also underutilized by employers, as are relationships with urban farms and gardens.



## Education and Skills Mostly Acquired On-Farm

**Over 70% of all farm workers stressed that they acquired their agricultural skills from on-farm training.** Many credited formal and informal farm internships/volunteer experiences over college (11%) and university (18%) agriculture and horticulture programs. The WWOOF network (18%), CRAFT

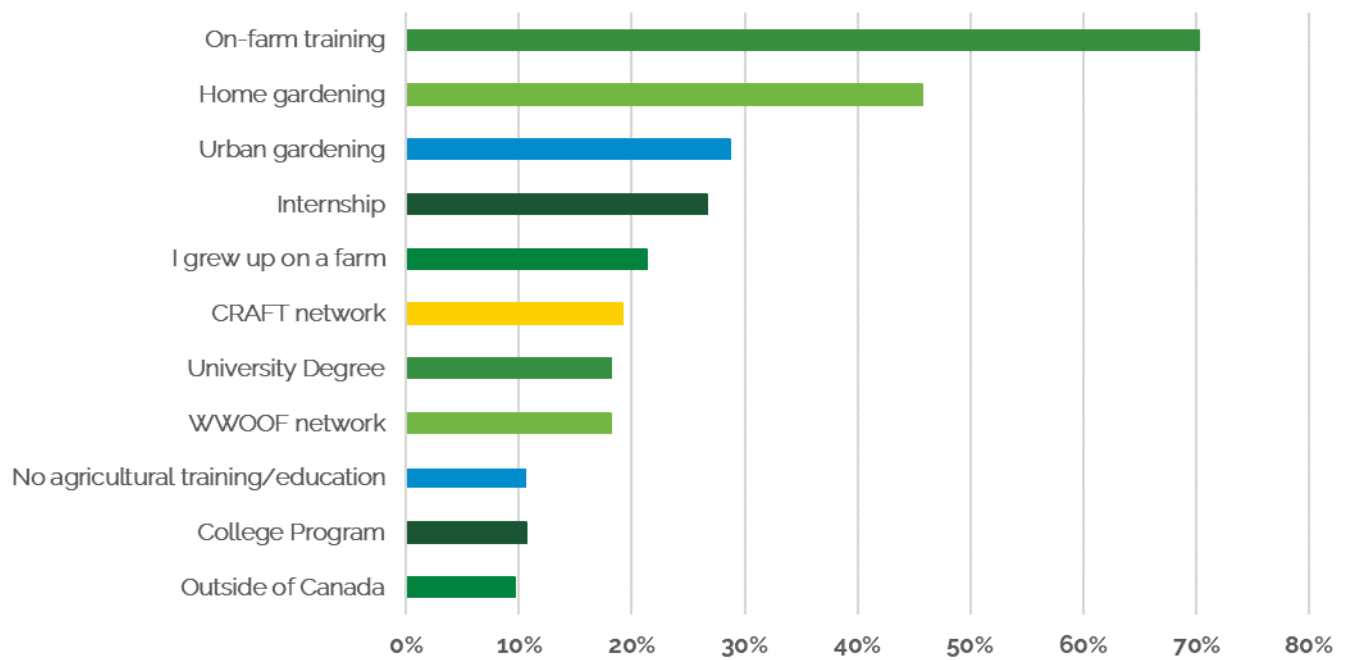
network (19%) and other internships (27%) were key opportunities for gaining the necessary farming knowledge and skills (see Chart 12). Farm operators also credited intern experiences as their pathway to eventual farm ownership:

“ I entered farming as an intern on a CRAFT Farm – 55 hours a week for \$100/weekly stipend & very sparse room and amazing food. It was

Chart 11: Recruitment and Job Seeking Sources



Chart 12: Where Farm Workers Acquired Their Skills (n=94)





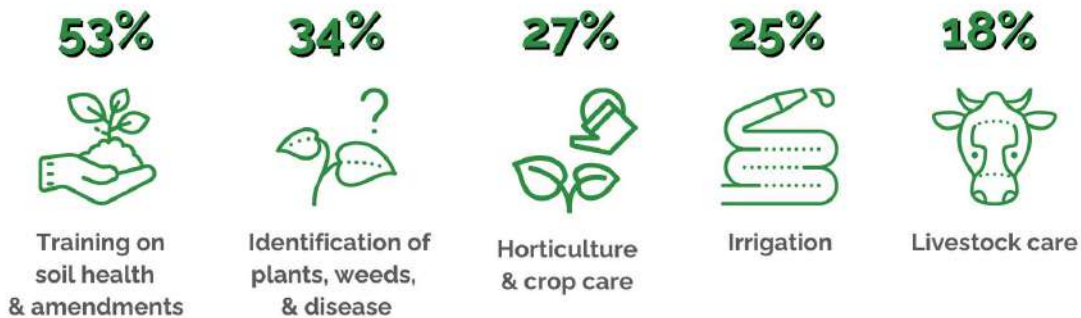
a 100% immersion in homestead life...this was the only farm experience I had before starting my own farm...in other words, not once did I ever pay to be taught at a post-secondary institution...I hope to be in a position to provide the same experience to aspiring farmers. ”  
 – FO Respondent

with local farmers and more government resources ought to be devoted to support farmers as on-farm trainers, including a formalized accreditation process.

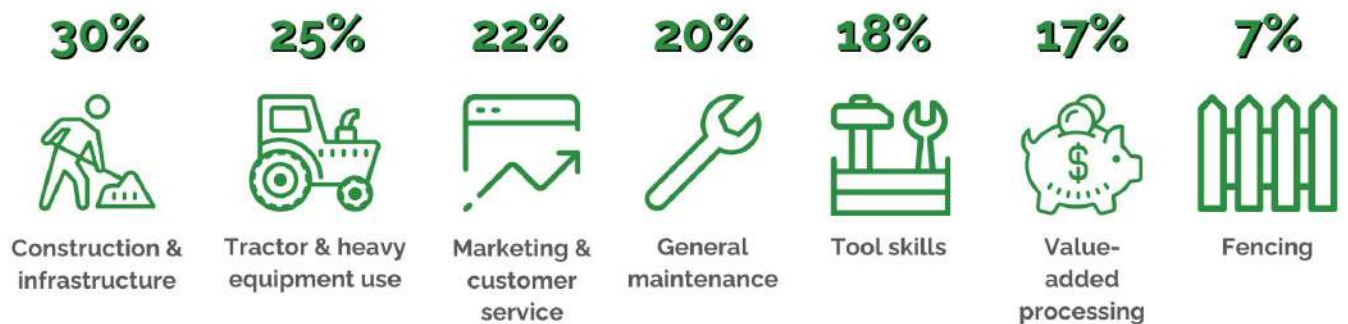
Almost 29% of farm workers acquired at least some of their skills at urban farms and gardens. Located in many urban centres across Ontario, non-profit urban farms are a largely untapped employment resource. Many of these farms offer dedicated training and garden plots for newcomers and BIPOC growers. However, the fact that the farm worker sample identified almost exclusively as white, and mostly worked rurally, makes the case for building stronger rural farmer-urban farm connections. This would be one avenue to ensure that racialized farm workers

Many workers and employers praised the horticulture and agricultural programs at Algonquin, Conestoga, Durham, Fleming, and Niagara Colleges and at the University of Guelph and Trent University. Co-op student opportunities were widely touted. However, it was a strongly held opinion that these programs should develop even deeper relationships

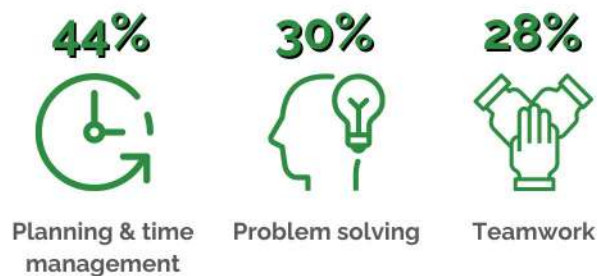
### Top Agricultural Skills Farm Workers Want



### Hard Skills Farm Workers Want



### Soft Skills Farm Workers Want



can access opportunities for rurally based knowledge sharing as desired. Cultivating these relationships, in conjunction with land succession initiatives, could also bolster access to farm ownership by those in urban areas who at present lack a network in rural settings.

With over 42% of farm employers indicating that a lack of skills, qualifications, and experience are barriers to finding qualified workers, the need to develop supports for farm employers that provide on-farm training was frequently voiced by project participants. Only 12% of total farm employers offered some form of structured training (e.g., participation in CRAFT, Ignatius Farm's online New Farmer Training Program). Farm workers' on-farm training varied from "very minimal...barely even directions for harvest" to "extensive training" on all aspects of the farm. Almost 37% of farm employers shared that, despite the importance of on-farm training, a lack of farm profitability was a barrier to hiring and training staff consistently (n=224). One farm operator stressed that "On-farm experience is something that should be valued. I wish there was more government support for that kind of programming."

Farm interns shared that the ratio of work to education can be unbalanced:

“There probably needs to be a discussion around internships and what makes them different than a paid farm position and how much education is actually being offered. The internship I participated in did not really have any formal education except for the monthly CRAFT meet up.” – FW Respondent

Farm workers expressed a desire for a wide variety of practical agricultural knowledge and a range of hard and soft skills.

Farm workers also seek education and sector-based discussions on "rights and social progress," "food justice and anti-oppression frameworks," "non-violent communication," and "trauma counselling."

## **COVID-19: Resiliency, Adaptation, and Increased Demand on Small and Mid-Sized Farms**

Where COVID-19 outbreaks caused shutdowns at corporate abattoirs, greenhouses, and farms, disrupted long supply chains and created shortages of goods in grocery stores, **small and mid-sized farms showed their resiliency and ability to adapt to pandemic conditions.**

Approximately 54% of farm employers indicated that the pandemic affected their labour needs (n=243). Two in 5 farm workers shared that the pandemic affected their employment (n=94).

Variations on COVID-19's impact can be seen based on farm size and production type; the pandemic was more likely to be registered as a concern for vegetable and melon farmers (68%, n=114) and farmers who employed more than 3 paid staff (61%, n=67).

The deaths of Bonifacio Eugenio Romero, Rogelio Muñoz Santos, and Juan López Chaparro, three migrant workers all under 60, during the first wave of the pandemic sent shockwaves through the agricultural community. Participants called for better working and housing conditions for migrant workers on farms and in abattoirs, who were among the workers hardest hit by COVID-19. Respondents who employ migrant workers shared quarantine difficulties, and noted the scattered and delayed arrival times, which made it harder to plan the season. Many reported they had far fewer migrant workers than usual. Major bunkhouse upgrades created additional labour needs.

Farm operators told us they were impressed by the number of young Ontarians who were willing to volunteer and/or work on a part-time basis over the summer. High school students started earlier due to school closures, and far fewer staff booked time off for vacation. Several operators shared that it had never been easier to obtain farm interns. Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) and the Youth Employment and Skills Program (YESP) grants filled the void for some operators. "The YESP program created funding for 3 employees, allowing us to work, organically, to weaken the hold of invasive species in fencerows and creek beds," said one farm operator. However, the paperwork, lengthy process, and backlogs in applications meant that farmers were not always able to fill all of their grant-funded positions.

“The farm I applied to work at did not receive all the funding they had applied for, so they were not able to hire me,” said a farm worker.

Not all farm operators were pleased with the response from the local labour pool. Farm operators complained that competing with the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) caused headaches and affected the number of hires and the hours employees were willing to work. Alternatively, one farm worker credited CERB with affording them the opportunity to become a tenant farmer, providing work for the property owners in exchange for land access.

Even after the successful lobby to reopen farmers’ markets, many farm operators stayed away, fearing declining sales. One farmer who continued to sell at markets commented that, due to safety requirements, it “now takes 3 people to run a market stand instead of 1.” Still, farm workers who were tasked with store and indoor farmers’ market sales worried about their extra exposure to the public in pandemic conditions.

Some farms cut back on staff. “I decided not to bring on any interns or staff this year,” commented one farm operator. Older farmers, fearing health risks, avoided bringing in their usual roster of employees. Those who had direct-to-restaurant or festival sales needed to pivot their sales model or downsize their staff. A mycelium facility shut down because of declining restaurant sales, affecting mushroom growers. Dependent on weddings as a primary source of income, flower farmers drastically reduced their workforce. Others downsized and shifted away from more labour-intensive crops, such as tobacco and vegetables. Several farmers purchased round balers and other equipment, and took the pandemic as an opportunity to mechanize jobs “to reduce the need for manual labour.” Some farm workers were affected by staff cutbacks, with more than one indicating that 2020-2021 winter work on livestock farms was scarce.

A lack of childcare meant that farm operators with children had a lot less time to attend to daily operations. Many relied on family to look after their children so they could tend to the fields.

Farm operators spent hours developing COVID-safe protocols and scrambled to find personal protective equipment (PPE) during the first pandemic wave. Several employers held video meetings with staff at

the beginning of the season to discuss ways to build a “positive atmosphere” and “keep up morale” among their work “bubble”. One went so far as ordering a food truck every week, so workers could enjoy a beer, a meal, and a weekly “shindig.”

Approximately three-quarters of farm workers noted that their employers provided the necessary PPE, adequate sanitation products, and physical distancing measures. Two-thirds received oral instruction in COVID-19 health and safety protocols, but only 2 in 5 workers were given written instructions. Alternative transportation to and from the work site was arranged by employers for under 15% of farm worker respondents. A troubling 7% of farm workers told us that their employer had made no COVID-19 health and safety changes (n=90). “My employer is not following COVID recommendations,” said one worker, adding that “the majority of staff do not wear masks when working indoors. When packing veggies, we were only a foot apart for 3 hours at a time.” Several farm workers expressed disappointment that their employers did not provide bonus pay, despite their being “essential” workers. Other workers noted that on-farm education decreased to accommodate extra workloads and social distancing requirements.

A number of farm workers shared that they had lost wages as a result of quarantine and stay-at-home orders. They were often ineligible for the federal Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB). In 2017, Ontario introduced the requirement for employers to provide workers with 10 personal emergency leave days (2 paid), any of which could be used for personal or family illness, but this was scrapped in 2019, prior to the pandemic. At project discussions and roundtables, farm workers and farm employers were overwhelmingly in favour of introducing permanent paid sick leave for all workers, with the Ontario government helping small businesses cover the costs to ensure full and universal coverage.

**While some farm operators struggled with staffing and operational adjustments, for many, the pandemic created a boom.** Online sales, CSA subscriptions, and seed and plant sales spiked and waitlists were created. Many hired more workers for general expansion, order-packing, delivery, and logistics. The “administrative workload,” said one operator, “has never been higher.” Logistics “took farm operators off the land” said another, “so that we could build web stores, manage pre-orders, and pre-pack all orders in order to follow COVID-safety

policies.” Other farmers felt the need to keep extra staff on to accommodate lost time due to workers staying home waiting for COVID test results. U-pick operations hired extra staff to offset lower customer turnout. “We are busier than we have been in the past,” said one farm operator, “It’s getting tiring, and we know we need some help before we burn out beyond repair.” “I ended up working way more due to the pandemic...60hrs/week for months,” commented one farm worker, who added: “Don’t get me wrong it’s a pretty sweet place to be isolated on a farm with access to hiking trails and nice co-workers to socialize with...but it’s definitely been busy and stressful.”

### **A shift in consumer and eating habits during the pandemic created an unprecedented demand for local food.**

“Since many of us were kept away from our usual off-farm jobs, and because we saw the need for more food self-sufficiency, and the local demand rose greatly, we farmed more than ever, so needed more help than ever before.” – FO Respondent

Farm operators and workers recognized an opportunity to challenge our long supply chains and win popular support for sustainable farm work as an “essential” service. The question many have asked is: **“When the pandemic lifts, how do we ensure that eaters don’t return to the major grocers and the demand for local food doesn’t return to pre-pandemic levels?”**

## **Employment Conditions**

### **Partial Exceptionalism and Agricultural Worker Employment Standards**

A number of provincial acts regulate paid agricultural labour in Ontario. However, as shall be seen, many of the standards that typically apply to workers in other employment sectors are not applicable to farm workers. Legal scholars describe the current employment standards for agricultural workers as “partial exceptionalism.”<sup>34</sup> The following briefly describes Ontario’s legal landscape for agricultural labour.

“The talk of labour shortages is nonsense. It is a treatment and pay issue, and those

who support sustainable farms should be requesting the exemptions to the standard labour code for farmers be removed, i.e., no breaks, no lunch, no vacation.”  
– FO Respondent

### ***Workplace Safety and Insurance Act (WSIA)***

Overseen by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act* (WSIA) promotes health and safety in the workplace and ensures compensation and other benefits are provided to injured workers and to the survivors of deceased workers. It provides no-fault workplace insurance for employers and workers in the province. Agricultural workers who provide labour in exchange for a wage are covered under the Act. Agricultural employers are required by law to pay insurance premiums through the WSIB, provide a first aid kit on the farm, and post WSIB regulations in a noticeable area. Farm employers widely reported compliance with the WSIA.

### ***The Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)***

As under the WSIA, if a farm worker provides labour in exchange for a wage, they are covered by the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. Under the OHSA, employers have the greatest responsibility for health and safety in the workplace and have a legal obligation to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of workers. Supervisors must also take appropriate steps to identify and address workplace hazards. And workers themselves must report hazards they know about to their employer or supervisor. No matter how few employees, farm employers are required to provide basic awareness training of a variety of workplace hazards including, if applicable: tractors and farm equipment; large animal handling; personal protective equipment; lockout procedures; hazardous atmospheres and confined spaces; slips, trips and falls; and occupational illness. The OHSA also covers roles and responsibilities of workplace parties with respect to workplace violence and harassment. The OHSA grants farm workers the right to know about potential hazards, the right to participate in the process of identifying and resolving workplace health and safety concerns, and the right to refuse

work that they believe is dangerous to the health and safety of themselves or their coworkers. Farm workers were not included under OSHA provisions until 2004.<sup>35</sup>



- c) **Near farmers** are involved in either mushroom growing, flower, trees and/or shrub growing, horse breeding and boarding, and the keeping of fur-bearing animals.
- d) **Landscape gardeners** are workers involved in non-construction related landscape gardening.

**Table 6: Exemptions and Special Rules for Agricultural Workers under the ESA**

	Farm Workers	Harvesters	"Near Farming"
Minimum Wage	✗	*	✓
Hours of Work	✗	✗	✗
Daily Rest Periods	✗	✗	✗
Time Off Between Shifts	✗	✗	✗
Weekly/Biweekly Rest Periods	✗	✗	✗
Eating Periods	✗	✗	✗
Public Holidays	✗	*	✗
Vacations with Pay	✗	*	✓

**Legend:** ✗ Exempt \* Special Rules Apply ✓ Covered

All classes of farm workers are covered under the following ESA standards: unpaid leave, notice of termination, severance pay, pregnancy leave, parental leave, regular payment of wages, pay equity, employment records required, and reprisal prohibition.

Under the exemptions highlighted in Table 6, a farm employer could hypothetically require a farm worker to labour 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year with no breaks and no mealtimes, and no overtime or vacation pay.<sup>36</sup> That same farm employer could hypothetically pay this same employee at a wage far below the minimum wage rate.

Clearly, in order to remain competitive and retain quality staff, taking advantage of farm worker exemptions is probably not in the best interests of farm employers, especially when there are concerns that there is an agricultural labour shortage. In addition, in the case of small and mid-sized employers, there is an interest in promoting mutual

### Employment Standards Act (ESA)

There are four categories of agricultural workers defined under the *Employment Standards Act* (ESA). These include:

- a) **Farm workers** are engaged in "primary production," including planting crops, cultivating, pruning, feeding, and caring for livestock.
- b) **Harvesters** are all those workers in fruit, vegetable, or tobacco production that are employed primarily to harvest or bring in produce for marketing or storage.

welfare and a healthy ecosystem of labour and production on which everyone depends.

Although opinions varied, many farm operator and worker respondents believed that ESA exemptions actually contribute to agricultural labour shortages, devalue farm work, and benefit corporate agribusinesses. Some farmers argued that ESA exemptions for farm workers are unnecessary and even harmful.

"The ESA exemptions for farm workers are pathetic," said one farm employer. "I try to offer as much as I can to them gradually over time, but it's a struggle to make it match [the] ESA ... Rules for workers and migrant labourers shouldn't differ. [Some] farmers will be reluctant to face [changes], but let's get some good baseline rules in place rather than waiving everything that [the] ESA stands for!"

Almost 74% of farm operators were in favour of extending full ESA protections, not just to residents, but also to migrant workers (n=308).

Even without widespread knowledge of their rights, 59% of farm workers advocated to be granted the full benefits of other workers under the ESA, including regulations around regular hours of work and overtime (n=88). The majority of farm workers highlighted how their farm employers exceeded ESA standards, and that many of their employers offered them rights typically exempted, but they were also outspoken that ESA exemptions devalue the essential work of all agricultural labourers and operators on

sustainable farms. As one farm worker put it: **"I've never felt exploited by my employer, but I do feel exploited by the system."**

In general, agricultural stakeholders suggested the need for agricultural employers and workers to be educated on the current limits to farm worker rights.

## **Agricultural Employees Protection Act (AEPA)**

Farm labourers are not covered under the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* (OLRA). In fact, the right to unionize and collectively bargain has long been denied to farm workers.

The 2003 AEPA grants farm workers the right to form associations without employer reprisal. However, the AEPA offers no legal collective bargaining rights, and no right to form an exclusive association free from employer influence. Under the AEPA, the employer has no legal responsibility to bargain with an association, and there is no dispute resolution mechanism beyond an appeal tribunal.

**Almost three-quarters of farm operators were in favour of granting resident and migrant workers the legal right to unionize (n=308).** Over 35% of farm workers disapproved of the AEPA's failure to provide the right to unionize and collectively bargain (n=88). Many farmers and workers shared that they were unaware of the limits of the AEPA.

In conversations with pro-union farmers, farm workers, the UFCW, and migrant rights groups, most concurred that there is little political momentum to abolish or reform the AEPA and grant workers their full union rights. However, unlike unionized workers who are limited in the types of extralegal actions they can take, farm workers can organize under the AEPA and could conceivably engage in recognition strikes, boycotts, and other disruptive pressure tactics. They could also enter into written agreements with employers sympathetic to their cause. A number of farm workers on small and mid-sized farms expressed interest in developing relationships with fellow labourers in large corporate agribusinesses and working with the UFCW and migrant rights groups to build their collective strength.



## ONTARIO FARM WORKERS' LABOUR RIGHTS TIMELINE

1918

### FIRST CANADIAN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING STATUTES

Farm workers excluded.

1918

### FARM WORKERS' RIGHTS & ADVOCACY ATTACKED & IGNORED

Attempts to organize FWs thwarted by corporate grower opposition and state repression. Progressive farm lobby focuses on input costs & declining commodity prices and does not articulate a position on FW rights.

1950

### ONTARIO LABOUR RELATIONS ACT (OLRA)

Farm workers excluded.

1966

### SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKER PROGRAM (SAWP)

State's interest in a cheap food policy and the power of the corporate farm lobby leads to a reliance on the "unfree labour" of migrant workers.

1970

### UNITED FOOD & COMMERCIAL WORKERS ORGANIZE FARM WORKERS

UFCW attempts to organize FWs but Labour Board rules that OLRA does not protect agricultural workers.

1994

### THE SHORT-LIVED AGRICULTURAL LABOUR RELATIONS ACT (ALRA)

New Democratic Party (NDP) government's ALRA briefly grants FWs the right to form a union but it is repealed by the incoming Progressive Conservatives (PC).

2001

### DUNMORE V ONTARIO (AG)

Supreme Court of Canada rules that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms includes the right to freedom of association but does not extend to FWs' collective bargaining rights.

2003

### AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYEES PROTECTION ACT (AEPA)

PC Harris government enacts AEPA to meet Charter obligations. AEPA grants FWs right to associate but does not provide legal collective bargaining rights.

2011

### ONTARIO (AG) V FRASER

After employers refused to bargain with FWs, UFCW challenges the AEPA under the Charter. In an 8 to 1 decision, the Supreme Court upholds Dunmore and denies FWs the right to collective bargaining.

2021

### FARM WORKERS STILL DENIED RIGHT TO UNIONIZE

Alberta and Ontario are the only provinces that do not grant FWs the right to form a union and bargain collectively.

## Farm Employer Best Practices – Matching Farm Values and a Good Management Style

**Matching farm values and a good management style or team culture top the list of non-wage benefits and best practices.**

On-farm meals, CSA shares and/or discounted produce were common on a majority of farms.

“Unfortunately, we are unable to pay more than minimum wage at this time, but we try to compensate by providing unlimited veg and flexible hours.” – FO Respondent

Although supplementary health and dental benefits were only offered on 4.2% of farms (n=190), over 46% of farm workers said having these benefits would increase the likelihood of them continuing their careers in agriculture (n=92).

“Lack of health insurance (particularly mental health support, massage, chiropractor, and other forms of body care that are particularly relevant for such physical work) is an issue for me.” – FW Respondent

Less than 5% of employers (n=224) and less than 3% of farm workers (n=69) believed that outdoor work was a barrier to hiring. In fact, 93% of farm workers were attracted to the job because they wanted to work outside (n=95).

Other farms have introduced novel non-monetary benefits, including free access and equipment to enjoy Ontario Parks; offering a “farm gym” for volunteers, replete with a personal trainer; and free passes to museums, cities, and tourism sites.

## Rural Transportation Challenges

**More than 55% of farms in our sample were more than 30 minutes away from the nearest city with at least 50,000 people (n=183).** Over 28% of farm employers considered transportation/commuting to their rural property as a barrier to hiring; another 16% highlighted that rural population declines had shrunk their labour pool. (n=224)

“It is particularly hard to find young people who can travel in a fairly remote area with no public transport unless they have access to a vehicle.” – FO Respondent

“It takes almost 2 hours daily [to commute] and costs a lot. No perks to compensate by the employer.” – FW Respondent

“Personal vehicle costs approx. \$200/monthly which is a significant portion of take-home pay.” – FW Respondent

Over one-quarter of the 66% of farm employee respondents who live off-farm said affordable and accessible transportation to and from the farm was a challenge for them. The average commute was under 30 minutes, although 20% of workers required in excess of one hour per day to travel on and off site. The majority (79%) commuted with their own vehicle, although 18% walked or rode a bike when possible, and 6% carpooled (although there was less carpooling during the pandemic). Only 4.5% relied on their employers for their transportation, and a lack of public transit in rural areas meant that only 1.5% took a bus (n=67).

## A Shortage of On-Farm and Rural Housing

Municipal and county bylaws and regulations preventing on-farm housing for workers was an issue of contention among both farm employers and workers.

**One in 8 farm operators and one-quarter of farm worker respondents believed a lack of quality, accessible housing was a barrier to hiring or a career in agriculture** (n=224; n=69).

Approximately 22% of farm employers surveyed had on-farm housing options available for their workers (n=190).

Almost half of farm workers who commute would consider living on-farm if the option were available (n=67).

Roughly one-third of farm worker respondents lived in on-site farm accommodations (n=102). Of these, 44% were in private accommodations, 26% bunked with up to three other employees, and 29% lived under the same roof as their employer (n=34).

Accommodations were free for half of these workers, 47% paid under \$600/month, with a handful paying \$600+/month (n=32).

Poor migrant worker housing conditions have come under scrutiny, especially during the pandemic. Our resident farm worker sample on small and mid-sized farms were mostly happy with their on-farm housing options. About 60% of our farm worker sample described their housing as “excellent” and 20% as “fair” (n=35). Others raised concerns of mould, lack of heating, running water, laundry, or Wi-Fi.

“At wages below ‘living-wages’, it is only a matter of time before staff who try to rent off farm are forced out by the cost of living off site... average rentals are 60-75% of my earnings.” – FW Respondent

“We do not have any on-farm housing options for staff, nor are there any rental opportunities to speak of in the area.” – FO Respondent

“Because of the pandemic, housing has been a challenge. I live 1hr drive from the farm, so they couldn’t hire me because there was nowhere for me to live.” – FW Respondent

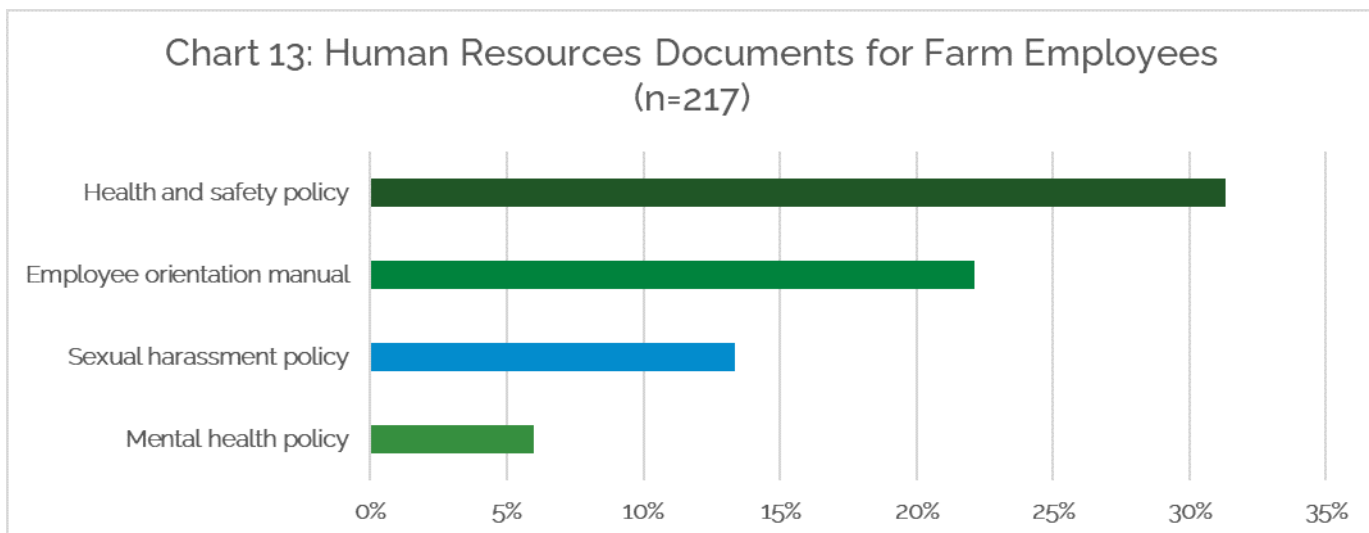
“Honestly, seasonal living on a farm is unrealistic. It is hard to find month to month and uprooting every 7 months is difficult. Living situations of farm workers are precarious and are actually bad...because of surveillance issues and also horrible landlords.” – FW Respondent

“There are limited options, other than off grid set ups, which require a lot of extra work. We would all like to see more support for on-farm accommodations.” – FW Respondent

“The long-term sustainability of my farming career will depend on my ability to live on-farm, but regulations preventing the construction of second dwellings (or even tiny houses/trailers/other temporary housing) is a major barrier.” – FW Respondent



## Human Resources Training and Documents Needed on Small and Mid-Sized Farms



Although farm employer respondents follow the legal protocols of WSIB, etc., many shared that they lacked a variety of HR documentation and knowledge (Chart 13). Over 60% said that, given other farm demands, they were unable to provide these documents. Instead, most rely on orally communicating expectations, workplace safety, and other farm policy. “We discuss safety and work culture directly,” explained one farm operator. Several farmers said that they’ve had to hastily create HR documents in order to comply with Canada Summer Job grants and/or other grant applications. Farm workers qualitatively shared that they are attracted to employers who make these kinds of resources available.

“Honestly I don’t have time for that stuff ...we’re drowning here!” – FO Survey Respondent

“I haven’t had the opportunity to create HR documents, but I try to foster a healthy work environment.” – FO Survey Respondent

Beyond lacking HR documents, a number of new farm operators expressed the need for HR skills training. “I do not have the skills needed to grow a farm business well enough to be able to hire staff with confidence,” said one. “Specific skills I need are interview methods and financial spreadsheets.”

“As a new employer, I was unclear on my requirements when it came to WSIB and taxes.” – FO Respondent

“I think it would be ideal if there was a training program for the employers, to help give farmers more human resource management skills. If you can master human resource management, then you have won the biggest challenge related to empowering your staff and achieving success.” – FO Respondent

### Future Plans and Policy Changes

#### Farm Operator Future Plans: Building and Growing the Agricultural Workforce

**A majority (57%) of current small and mid-sized farm employers plan to hire new workers over the next five years, with 47% intending to increase their total number of staff (n=176).** Based on the total number of Ontario farm employers in the 2016 Census of Agriculture, it is extrapolated from the survey sample findings that there are upwards of 7,014 farms planning to hire new workers and 5,783 farms that would like to increase their total number of staff.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to new workers, 43% of employers emphasized a desire to hire workers with better skills and qualifications and 39% will be seeking experienced staff capable of taking on management roles. Over the next five years, 4 in 10 farm operators have plans to expand and scale up their operations, while 13% are hoping to build new infrastructure. Almost 55% of farm operators shared the short-term goal of making ecological or sustainability

## What would help farm workers achieve their goals? (n=92)



improvements, and they insisted their success will depend on their ability to maintain a workforce capable of maintaining their day-to-day operations. By finding solutions to their labour needs, over two-thirds of farm operators are hoping to “take more breaks and rest” (n=176).

### Farm Worker Future Plans: Ways to Help Farm Workers Achieve their Goals

A majority (57%) of farm worker respondents seek a life-long career as a farm worker, and an additional 29% are contemplating one. This is important given the average age of 55 among Ontario’s current farm operators. Ultimately, 53% of farm workers would like to own and operate their own farm, while another 28% are considering the possibility of farm ownership (n=95).

Farm worker respondents suggested a variety of measures that would help them achieve their goals and continue their farming careers. It is no surprise that affordable land for purchase (64%) and living wages (60%) topped the list. Resolving these issues will help retain young talent.

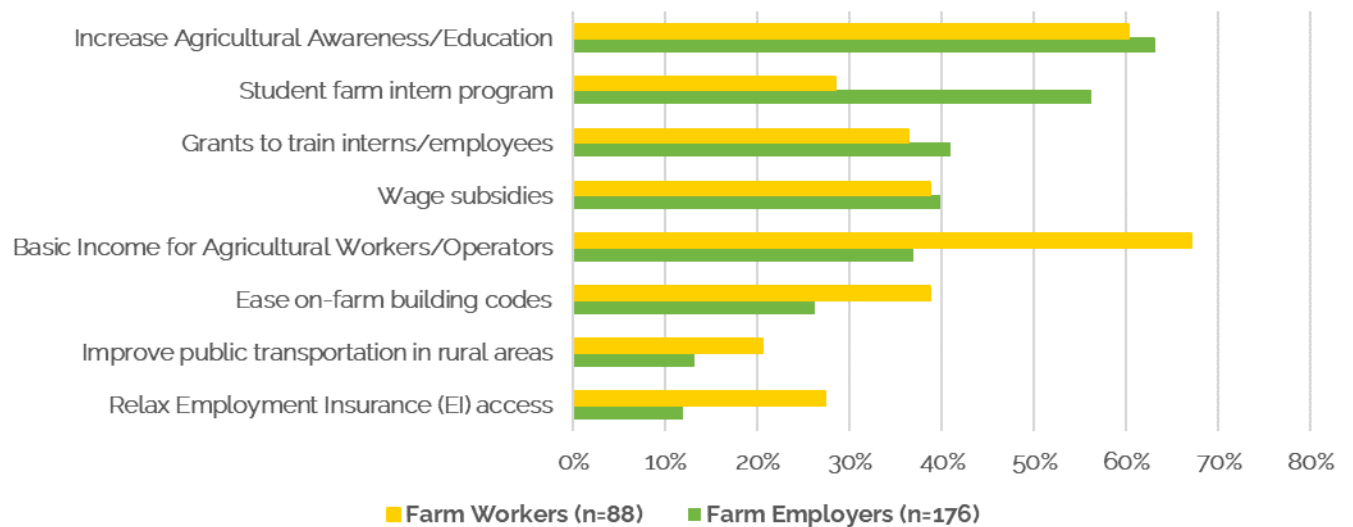
### Farm Operator and Worker Solidarity – Local and International

Participants stressed the need for greater solidarity between small and mid-sized farm operators and

agricultural workers. In fact, a major theme identified in the Farm Labour Project was that, unlike other workplaces where employers/employees are often pitted in antagonistic relationships, on small and mid-sized farms there is a great deal of mutuality, shared understanding, and common goals. Many desired to spread this solidarity beyond the farm gates. Farm workers wish to forge meaningful connections with migrant and resident workers employed in large-scale corporate agribusiness. Aware that low wages and precarious farm incomes are a product of a capitalist global food system, several farm workers and operators mentioned that they are active participants in La Vía Campesina, an international movement of millions of peasants, small and mid-sized farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, Indigenous people, migrants, and agricultural workers. La Vía Campesina’s defense of food sovereignty, sustainable production, and anti-corporate agrarian reform is an important grassroots and popular effort that seeks to redress the global devaluing of agricultural labour.<sup>38</sup>

“Canada has for far too long neglected food producers and we farmers have been terrible at standing in solidarity. Instead, we martyr ourselves and expect employees to accept the same working conditions. Everyone just needs to value farm work more appropriately. We need living wages.” – FO respondent

Chart 14: Top 8 Proposed Policies/Actions to Support Farm Workers/Operators



## Policy Actions to Improve the Farm Labour Situation

Farmers and farm workers shared a number of policies and actions to support a more robust and sustainable agricultural workforce on small and mid-sized farms (see Chart 14). These included campaigns to raise eater awareness on agricultural issues, improved housing and transportation access, a variety of supports for on-farm training, and financial interventions to offset low wages and low farm incomes. Some of these policies and actions will be discussed in greater detail below.

### Farm Labour Grants

Almost 40% of both farm operators and workers think that government should prioritize increasing and extending access to farm labour grants and subsidies (see Chart 14). For many farm operators, providing agroecological knowledge, and hard and soft skills, is extra non-remunerated work. With poor retention, farmers might not even directly reap the benefits of their educational efforts. To grow both their operations and the next generation of farmers, grants and subsidies are vital. In particular, farmers called for the criteria of existing grants (Canada Summer Jobs, Youth Employment and Skills Program, etc.) to be extended by duration (to cover the growing season) and by age qualification (to allow farmers to apply for grants for workers over the age of 30).

“Labour Grants are literally what made it possible for us to hire staff and grow as a business. Had they not been available to us in our first few years we simply would not have had the guts to take the hit economically to begin hiring and scaling up. We believe that they are absolutely crucial to the growth of small farms because so many small-scale farmers are in a 'boot strap' business model where money is so tight and growth can tend to be slow.” – FO Respondent

### From Farm Worker to Operator – Co-ownership and Land Access

Over 64% of farm workers hope to find more affordable land for purchase, and, if not for purchase, almost 24% hope to find affordable rental property. Over one half of the farm worker sample plan to one day own their own farm, yet the cost of land is prohibitive. Barring a crash in land values, over 25% of farm workers said the need for co-ownership operating models and succession/land access plans will be crucial to their success (n=92).

“ I’m trying to purchase my own farm, which is extraordinarily difficult in Ontario due to land commodification, land speculation, land grabbing, and capitalist imperialism in general. ” – FW Respondent

## Increase Agricultural Awareness/ Education

Over 60% of farm operators and workers considered increasing agricultural awareness and providing eater education as a top policy action to ensure the health of the sector (see Chart 14).

For many farmers, eater education is a value-added, and yet another unpaid component of their job – they post recipes on their websites, visit schools and invite youth to field days, provide workshops at community gardens, and/or offer essential training and education among their staff. These farmers would like to see their educational work amplified and supported by industry stakeholders and Ontario consumers.

“ I love doing what I do, but the job will continually get harder unless the public learns more about agriculture. There are a lot of issues we need them on our side for, because we don’t have the time or resources to take it all on. At the end of the day these issues affect everybody. ” – FW Respondent

Farmers’ own work has been devalued through the promotion of cheap food. The true costs of production, including the environmental impact and living wages, are not represented on the grocery shelves.

“ I think farmers and farm workers are worth more than they accept, but are we valuing ourselves as much as we are really worth? For farms to be financially strong we need strong farmers who stand up for their worth. I think we can love what we do AND get well paid for it. ” – FO Respondent

A number of farmers shared that if low food prices = low pay, it only makes young people less likely to see farming as an “appealing” career.

“ It’s hard to consider agriculture as a wise career choice if you essentially know you will live in poverty or incredible debt, or both. ” – FW Respondent

## Conclusion: Opening Doors – Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Farmers and Farmworkers

**Ontario’s small to mid-sized farms are robust agricultural job creators.** In fact, the Farm Labour Project found that farms under 70 acres were more likely to be employing Ontarians than their larger counterparts. These modest farms are also **the knowledge incubators** for the next generation of farmers. **Supporting small and mid-sized farm hiring, training, and retention practices will be vital to resolving the skilled-labour shortage in the agricultural sector.** Similarly, creating viable conduits to farm ownership for seasoned farm workers through **land-linking, land-sharing and/or co-operative opportunities** will be crucial to offset soaring land prices and ensure there are successors for our aging population of farm operators.

However, **without living wages/incomes we are unlikely to attract enough Ontarians willing to acquire the skills and dedicate their lives to agricultural production.**

Tackling the twin problems of the **farm income** and the **living-wage farm labour crises** is a complicated proposition. Three decades of free trade agreements combined with the neoliberal gutting of our social safety nets has created unprecedented financial precarity for the essential workers who grow our food. Global supply chains and the erosion of the social safety net has only exacerbated our historical reliance on unpaid, low-paid, and unfree agricultural labour.

**Provincially legislated living-wage increases cannot address the downward pressure of commodity prices in our capitalist global food system.** If labour costs increase and foods produced in Canada become more expensive, grocery stores and other wholesale purchasers will just increase their reliance on *imported* equivalents (for anything not protected by quota or regionally unique to the country). **We also cannot put the onus on consumers to spend more on food when we know that low-income and racialized**

**communities are suffering from a chronic lack of food security.** Only an international grassroots movement, like La Vía Campesina, that pressures our capitalist global food system to provide a living income for *all* food producers can ultimately rectify the world-wide devaluing of agricultural work.

In the meantime, if we want to open the doors to living-wage jobs and increase farm incomes in Canadian agriculture without tariffs or other protective market mechanisms, then even more government support is needed. **Farm labour grants and wage subsidies, improved access to EI, and ideally a Basic Income are urgently required to ensure farm workers and operators are receiving a decent annual income regardless of their hourly wage, farm earnings, or the length of their season.**

## Recommendations

The farm operator and worker recommendations below are clustered in two sections. The first, **“Building Farm Employer and Farm Worker Capacity,”** suggests measures that farmers, farm organizations, community-groups, eaters, and other stakeholders can take to support and grow Ontario’s agricultural workforce. In exploring and developing these actions, farmers and allies may develop additional recommendations for government grants and other legislative supports.

The second, **“Municipal, Provincial, and/or Federal Support and Legislation,”** provides key policy recommendations directed at elected officials and all levels of government. The implementation of these policies will support the essential work on Ontario’s small and mid-sized farms.

### Building Farm Employer and Farm Worker Capacity

- **Provide Human Resources (HR) Training for Farm Operators:** Though they are experts in growing food and managing livestock, small and mid-sized farm operators often do not have the time, or the knowledge, to adequately hire, manage, and retain workers. Offering farm operators specific training in working with staff and providing related templates and resources tailored to the needs of small and mid-sized farms would benefit operators and workers by fostering healthy, transparent, accountable, and safe workplaces.
- **Promote Best Practices for Farm Employers:** A majority of farm operators and workers stressed that matching farm values, and a good management style or team culture creates a positive and attractive work environment. On-farm meals and free or discounted produce were also strong enticements for new and returning workers. Although few farms offered profit-sharing/ownership stakes or a supplementary health and dental plan, workers shared that such practices would play a factor in their pursuit of a long-term agricultural career. Promoting these and other “best practices” and encouraging their adoption on other farms will help small and mid-sized farmers attract Ontarians who are motivated by factors beyond financial remuneration.
- **Fund Training Programs for New Farmers and Farm Workers:** Over 70% of farm workers acquired their agricultural skills from on-farm training. Training and educational offerings are especially prevalent on rural small and mid-sized farms and on urban non-profit community farms. Novel programs like Ignatius Farm’s online New Farmer Training Program currently lack stable funding in spite of meeting a real need in the agricultural sector.
- **Support Co-operative Initiatives:** Less than 5% of farms surveyed were co-operatives, but almost 13% would consider forming a co-operative. Over 48% of workers were interested in co-operative farming opportunities. Given the financial constraints on farm operators and staff, it is recommended that farm organizations work closely with Local Food and Farm Co-ops (LFFC) to support farmers wishing to start or transition to co-operative models.
- **Improve Farmland Protection and Access:** The need to protect farmland from development and protect small and mid-sized farms from being absorbed by large corporate agribusinesses is crucial to addressing the farm income and living-wage farm labour crises. Mortgage and debt payments create barriers for farmers to hire. Over 64% of farm workers shared that skyrocketing land prices are preventing them from accessing land. Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) face additional barriers

to accessing land and achieving food sovereignty for their communities. Allying with the Ontario Farmland Trust and generating land-linking, land-sharing, and succession opportunities between retiring and aspiring farmers will help protect farmland and create pathways for experienced agricultural workers to become the next generation of farmers.

- **Organize All Farm Workers under the Agricultural Employee Protection Act (AEPA):** Almost three-quarters of farm operators were in favour of granting farm workers the right to unionize. Although the AEPA only grants workers the right to associate, it is recommended that union-friendly farm employers encourage their staff to associate under the AEPA and that farm workers on small and mid-sized farms develop relationships with fellow labourers in corporate agriculture, and work with the UFCW and migrant rights groups to build their collective strength. A unified voice for workers will strengthen capacity to promote shared interests in fair wages, local food, food security, land stewardship, and healthy livelihoods for all.
- **Increase Consumer Awareness of the Undervaluing of Agricultural Labour:** During the pandemic, many Ontario consumers realized that agricultural labour was essential skilled work. Almost two-thirds of farm operators and agricultural workers would like politicians, farm organizations, and other stakeholders to support a popular movement promoting fair food prices to mitigate farm income insecurity and low pay.

### Municipal, Provincial, and/or Federal Support and Legislation

- **Increase and Enhance Farm Labour Grants for Small and Mid-sized Farm Operations:** Approximately 40% of both farm operators and workers think that government should prioritize increasing and extending access to farm labour grants and subsidies. Many called for the extension of age qualifications and contract durations for Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) and the Youth Employment and Skills Program (YESP). Some respondents also wished to see the CSJ and YESP provide a “living wage” and not just the Ontario minimum.
- **Overhaul Temporary Foreign Worker Programs:** Over two-thirds of farm operator respondents agree with migrant-led movements on the need for permanent status for migrant workers. There is a strong contingent of farmers who are keen to see a variety of labour rights extended to TFWs.
- **Enact Universal Paid Sick Days:** Labour disruptions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear to farm operators and workers of the need for permanent paid sick days for all workers, including farm operators.
- **Offer a Basic Income (BI):** Almost 37% of farm operators and 67% of farm labourers consider a BI to be a top priority to protect farm workers and operators from financial insecurity. In the absence of protective market mechanisms, a BI would be one of the most effective ways to ensure a decent annual income regardless of hourly wages, farm earnings, or the seasonality of production.
- **Improve Employment Insurance (EI) Access:** Resident and migrant farm workers alike pay into EI through payroll deductions, but they either have difficulty accessing or are barred from accessing this benefit. Decreasing the insurable hours for farm workers to qualify for EI access and extending EI to migrant workers, even after they have left Canada for the season, would fairly offer workers needed income insurance.
- **Ease Building Codes to Support On-Farm Housing:** Over 38% of farm workers and 26% of farm employers called on county and municipal governments to ease building codes that limit on-farm housing, while maintaining regulations to prevent large developments on agricultural-zoned land.

## Endnotes

- 1 Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council. (2019). ["How Labour Challenges Will Shape the Future of Agriculture in Ontario: Agriculture Forecast to 2029,"](#) p.5.
- 2 For historical research on the international, racialized, gendered, and class-based dimensions of farm labour in Ontario see, for example, Edward Ira Dunsworth. (2019). "The Transnational Making of Ontario Tobacco Labour, 1925-1990," PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto; and Carmela Patrias. (Fall 2016). "More Menial than Housemaids? Racialized and Gendered Labour in the Fruit and Vegetable Industry of Canada's Niagara Region, 1880-1945," *Labour/Le Travail* 78, pp.69-104.
- 3 Although most workers were released from contractual obligations by the end of the century, indentured and unfree labour persisted. Between 1869 and 1932, over 100,000 orphans and destitute 'Home Children' were sent from Britain and indentured on rural farms across Canada until they came of age.
- 4 CAHRC, "Agricultural Forecast to 2029," p.6.
- 5 Darrin Qualman and the National Farmers Union. (2019). [Tackling the Farm Crisis and the Climate Crisis: A Transformative Strategy for Canadian Farms and Food Systems](#), discussion document. Saskatoon: NFU, pp.5, 10-11.
- 6 A "living wage" is a wage high enough to maintain a normal standard of living. The Ontario Living Wage Network's dated calculations for living wages in regions across the province range between \$16 and \$22. See [https://www.ontariolivingwage.ca/living\\_wage\\_by\\_region](https://www.ontariolivingwage.ca/living_wage_by_region). Ontario's Fight for \$15 and Fairness movement, recently relaunched as "Justice for Workers," is now organizing around a \$20 minimum wage for all. See <https://www.justice4workers.org/movement>.
- 7 Michael Ekers. (2019). "The Curious Case of Ecological Farm Interns: On the Populism and Political Economy of Agro-Ecological Farm Work," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:1, p.40.
- 8 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan to have in-person focus groups and on-farm visits was replaced by phone and online communications. Informal interviews of key stakeholders, including academics, urban growers, and migrant rights associations took place over the course of this study. Presentations of preliminary findings followed by group discussions also informed this report. These discussions occurred at the NFU-O, EFAO, and LFFC conventions, at four NFU-O Local meetings, and at a "farm worker meet-up."
- 9 The farm worker survey had a series of questions tailored to migrant farm workers and was translated into Spanish. However, after conversations with migrant workers' rights organizations, it was decided to focus on allyship-building during the pandemic rather than promotion of the survey to migrant farm workers. For this reason, the project did not collect any migrant farm worker survey responses.
- 10 CAHRC. (2011). "Labour Market Information: Focus on Small Farms in Canada."
- 11 Michael Ekers, Charles Z. Levkoe, Samuel Walker, Bryan Dale. (2016). "Will Work for Food: Agricultural Interns, Apprentices, Volunteers, and the Agrarian Question," *Agricultural Human Values* 33, pp.705-720; Michael Ekers and Charles Z. Levkoe. (2016). "Transformations in Agricultural Non-Waged Work: From Kinship to Intern and Volunteer Labor," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 6:2, pp.179-183; Anelyse M. Weiler, Gerardo Otero, Hannah Wittman. (2016). "Rock Stars and Bad Apples: Moral Economies of Alternative Food Networks and Precarious Farm Work Regimes," *Antipode* 48:2, pp.1140-1162; Charles Z. Levkoe. (2018). "Engaging the Tensions of Ecological Internships: Considerations for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems Movements," *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 42:3, pp.242-263; Michael Ekers. (2019). "The Curious Case of Ecological Farm Interns: On the Populism and Political Economy of Agro-Ecological Farm Work," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:1, pp.21-43.
- 12 There is extensive scholarship on migrant agricultural workers in Canada. Some of the publications that have informed this study include, Anelyse M. Weiler, Charles Z. Levkoe, Carolyn Young. (2015). "Cultivating Equitable Ground: Community-based Participatory Research to Connect Food Movements with Migrant Farmworkers," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6:2, pp.73-87; Clinton Beckford. (2016). "The Experiences of Caribbean Migrant Farmworkers in Ontario," *Social and Economic*

- Studies* 65:1, pp.153-188; Emily Reid-Musson. (2017). "Grown Close to Home™: Migrant Farmworker (Im)mobilities and Unfreedom on Canadian Family Farms," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107:3, pp.716-730; Anelyse M. Weiler, Janet McLaughlin, and Donald C. Cole. (2017). "Food Security at Whose Expense? A Critique of the Canadian Temporary Farm Labour Migration Regime and Proposals for Change," *International Migration* 55:4, pp.48-63; Manoj Dias-Abey. (2018). "Justice on Our Fields: Can 'Alt-Labor' Organizations Improve Migrant Farm Workers' Conditions?," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 53:1, pp.167-212; Jill Hanley et al. (2020). "Protecting the Rights of Migrant Farmworkers in Quebec: To What Extent can Unionization Overcome the Effects of Precarious Immigration Status?," *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 15:2, pp.122-146; Ella Haley et al. (2020). "Migrant Farmworkers Face Heightened Vulnerabilities During COVID-19," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9:3, pp.1-5.
- 13 For historical analysis of farm labour in Canada that informed this study, see Fay Faraday, Judy Fudge, and Eric Tucker. (2012). *Constitutional Labour Rights in Canada; Farm Workers and the Fraser Case*. Toronto: Irwin Law; Jonah Butovsky and Murray E.G. Smith. (Spring 2007). "Beyond Social Unionism: Farm Workers in Ontario and Some Lessons from Labour History," *Labour/Le Travail* 59, pp.69-97; Stephanie Bangarth. (2005). "The Long, Wet Summer of 1942: The Ontario Farm Service Force, Small-town Ontario and the Nisei," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38:1, pp.40-62.
  - 14 Statistics Canada. (2011, 2016). [Table 32-10-0439-01 Paid agricultural work in the year prior to the census](#). Statistics Canada. (2001, 2006). [Farm Data and Farm Operator Data, catalogue no. 95-629-XWE](#).
  - 15 Revenue varies not only by land size, but also by type of production. According to BDO and Agrifood Management Excellence Inc., the per-acre net revenue of an Ontario grain/oilseed farm is between \$773 and \$1,375, whereas some small mixed vegetable farm respondents in this study shared that they were generating a per acre net revenue of over 70 times that amount. While it is true that the labour expenses for small-scale vegetable farmers are much higher than a cash-cropper, this also means that they create more jobs. For grain/oilseed net revenue, see BDO & Agrifood Management Excellence Inc. (2020). [Farm Profitability: Benchmarking for Better Decisions](#). Many farmer and farm worker respondents credited the influence of Québec farmer Jean-Martin Fortier on promoting the financial and ecological benefits of small-scale organic vegetable production. See Jean-Martin Fortier. (2014). *The Market Gardener: A Successful Grower's Handbook for Small-Scale Organic Farming*. British Columbia: New Society Publishers.
  - 16 Statistics Canada. (2019). [Table 32-10-0136-01 Farm operating revenues and expenses, annual](#). The "salary/wage expenditure" is a sub-category of "general expenditures."
  - 17 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0439-01 Paid agricultural work in the year prior to the census](#).
  - 18 Our methodology may have captured some farm operators who are being undercounted by existing statistics.
  - 19 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0441-01 Farm operators classified by number of operators per farm and sex](#).
  - 20 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0442-01 Farm operators classified by number of operators per farm and age](#).
  - 21 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0404-01 Farms classified by total farm area](#).
  - 22 Farms under 70 acres employed only 29% of all temporary foreign workers identified in this study.
  - 23 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0404-01 Farms classified by total farm area](#).
  - 24 There may be some discrepancies in the survey/census comparison as we asked, "what area do you farm?", not total farm size.
  - 25 Statistics Canada. (2000-2019). [Table 32-10-0047-01 Value per acre of farm land and buildings at July 1](#). Not adjusted for inflation. During the 2020 pandemic, farmland values increased by another 4.7% with some areas of prime agricultural land reporting values of over \$32,000/acre. See Farm Credit Canada (2020). ["FCC Farmland Values Report 2020."](#)
  - 26 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0403-01 Farms classified by farm type](#).



- 27 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0433-01 Farms classified by operating arrangement.](#)
- 28 Michael Ekers, Charles Z. Levkoe, Samuel Walker, Bryan Dale. (2016). "Will Work for Food: Agricultural Interns, Apprentices, Volunteers, and the Agrarian Question," *Agricultural Human Values*, 33, pp. 705-720.
- 29 Ekers, "The Curious Case of Ecological Farm Interns," p.28.
- 30 Migrant Workers' Alliance for Change. (2020). ["Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19 & Migrant Workers in Canada."](#)
- 31 UFCW Canada and the Agriculture Workers Alliance (AWA). (2020) ["The Status of Migrant Farm Workers in Canada, 2020."](#)
- 32 Employers of TFWs were more likely to be in favour of increasing supply/access (65%). A slimmer majority of TFW employers were in favour of pathways to citizenship (57%) and improving access to healthcare, insurance, and WSIB (52%), but only a minority were in favour of extending labour protections, including the right to unionization (35%) and offering full access to EI (44%). Note that TFWs and their employers pay into EI but TFWs cannot access the benefits.
- 33 Farm workers on salary and farm workers paid below the minimum wage are not included in this average.
- 34 See Faraday et al, *Constitutional Labour Rights in Canada*.
- 35 WSIB. (2019). By the Numbers: [WSIB Statistical Report](#).
- 36 Statistics Canada. (2016). [Table 32-10-0439-01 Paid agricultural work in the year prior to the census.](#)
- 37 The National Farmers Union (NFU) is a founding member of La Vía Campesina. For more information, see Annette Aurélie Desmarais. (2007). *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing; [La Vía Campesina](#),
- 38 Ontario. (2020 updated). ["Agriculture, growing, breeding, keeping and fishing."](#)