

# BRIEF ON AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD IMMIGRATION DEMAND AND TFWP CHALLENGES FOR OUR SECTOR



CANADIAN MEAT COUNCIL



mushrooms.canada



*Kadek is a Harvester on a mushroom farm in Leamington. She is a new recruit learning how to pick mushrooms that requires over 6 months on-the-job training.*



*Erick is a Harvest Supervisor working on a mushroom farm for 5 years. He has paid for university for his wife, private school for his son, and a house in his home country. He is waiting to see if he can use the AFIP.*



*Breslau, Ontario, butchers at the Conestoga Meat Processing plant. They are hoping to use the AFIP to immigrate to Canada.*

Prepared for the Standing Committee on  
Citizenship and Immigration

Study: Labour Market Impact Assessment under the  
Temporary Foreign Workers Program

May 3, 2021



The Canadian Meat Council (CMC) and Mushrooms Canada (MC) thanks the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for the Opportunity to provide testimony to your study on the Labour Market Impact Assessment under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program.

We also want to thank the Government of Canada and the Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) Department for recognizing Canada’s Agriculture and Agri-Food sector as essential and including our occupation codes as a priority within the immigration regulations during this pandemic. We are grateful for the Government and all Members of Parliament support at this time as our Canadian farmers and processors and our essential workers produce, package and process food for Canada and the world.

The Agri-Food industry creates 1 in 8 jobs in Canada, and contributes \$111 billion per year to the economy - over 6% of Canada’s GDP. This represents \$304 million per day, creating 2.3 million jobs. Our Agriculture and Agri-Food sector is creating quality jobs with competitive wages that offer occupation progression.

<b>Meat Processing</b>	<b>Mushrooms</b>
<p><b>Meat processing sector jobs:</b> 31,136  <b>TFWs employed:</b> 1,190  <b>Job Vacancies:</b> Doubled from 1,650 (2018) to over 4,000 (2021).</p> <p><b>Wages:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Butchers Wage Entry to Exper: \$Min to \$28.00/hr → extensive training at entry level phase</li> <li>• Supervisors: \$49,00 to \$85,000/yr</li> <li>• Managers: \$60,000 to \$147,000/yr</li> </ul> <p>+ Meat processing plants offer benefit packages</p>	<p><b>Mushroom sector jobs:</b> Over 4,000  <b>TFWs employed:</b> Over 920  <b>Job Vacancies:</b> 20% job vacancy rate</p> <p><b>Wages:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harvesters Entry to Exper: \$Min to \$29/hr → extensive training offered at entry level phase</li> <li>• Supervisor: \$35,000/yr to \$80,000 /yr</li> <li>• Managers: \$42,500-\$171,000/yr</li> </ul> <p>+ Mushroom farms offer benefit packages</p>

Our employers participate in ongoing advertising, recruitment fairs, increased recruitment, training, and retention practices including language training, more robust advertising in core business geographics, and integrated work with community/social service providers, augmented referral incentives, augmented student incentives and more. In spite of this increased recruitment, the challenges related to labour, skills, and talent on the farm and in meat processing remain critical.

Despite recruitment best practices, our sectors have farms and plants that are approaching 20% job vacancy rates. This is a critical and serious situation impeding our food system. Recent preliminary data from meat processing indicates there are over 4,000 empty butcher stations. This number has more than doubled over 3 years ago.

Our immigration demand is strong for these year-round, permanent positions, as highlighted by the number of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) we have filling these critical job vacancies when Canadians do not apply. Research conducted by the University of Saskatchewan indicates that for every job vacancy filled that 4 more are created in the value chain.

We feel that there are two major contributing factors limiting our ability to fill job vacancies. Both we do not control.

## 1. TFW CAP ON MEAT PROCESSING IS A CAP ON ECONOMIC GROWTH AND JOBS IN CANADA:

For meat processing, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) Cap is now severely capping our meat processing capacity in Canada. TFWP Cap is not allowing us to fill job vacancies in meat processing plants and it limits our processing capacity. Recent data from an ongoing survey shows some of our plants are approaching 20% job vacancy rate. This needs to be reviewed, adapted to our reality and fixed quickly for Canadian meat processors to continue to fill Canadian grocery shelves. For every 1 TFW hired in our meat plants, it creates 4 other jobs in our value chain. **This is why we ask for a re-set on the TFWP Cap to allow the plants to fill their empty butcher stations. Canada's meat processors cannot do any value-added cuts or move forward with expansion plans due to this labour shortage.**

## 2. WE EXIST IN RURAL CANADA:

The second factor affecting both agri-food and agriculture recruitment, is the rural location of our plants and farms. We exist in rural Canada, away from the urban centres where the labour pool is located. This is because of municipal regulations and cities not wanting these food activities for slaughter of animals and compost to be conducted close to urban areas due to air quality challenges.

When Canadians do not apply for jobs in primary processing plants and on the farm, then we turn to the TFWP.

**There is nothing temporary about our jobs –  
our jobs are full time and permanent.**

This is why for our usage of the TFWP, we feel it should be looked upon differently – for us the TFWP it is actually an **extension of immigration programming**, because our workers don't have access to the same immigration programs that other sectors such as the technology industry has. For our employers, the TFWP is the only option. Our companies must fill farm and processing jobs that lets them place workers in the rural area where there are job vacancies. **More importantly, in meat processing, research demonstrates that once a TFW receives a path to permanent resident – they stay in rural Canada, with that company, for over 10 years.**

### **TFWP and new Agri-Food Immigration Pilot (AFIP) Important Part of Recruitment and Retention Strategy**

When we cannot find Canadians, then our farm and food companies try to find and recruit people in countries that live in the rural areas and who work in agricultural occupations already. We need to find people with some agricultural and meat cutting skills and experience. When we are allowed to recruit and place people who are **interested** in Canadian agriculture through the TFWP, they stay on the job on our farms and plants for many years, even after they are allowed permanent residence.

Much of the skills and experience our sector needs is provided through on-the-job training. Unfortunately, the immigration programs in Canada, in general, do not recognize either the experience and skills our workers have before they arrive, neither do they recognize the very valuable experience and skills they gain on Canadian farms and in our processing plants. The Canadian Express Entry immigration point system is instead focussed on higher university education for urban jobs, not what we need for the vast majority of the jobs required in the rural areas to pick, package, and process.

For this reason, we thank the Government of Canada for recognizing our industry as key sector within Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada's immigration strategy by last year's launch of the AFIP with 2,750 spots in May 2020. We have worked closely with the Ministry on this pilot. We are counting on the AFIP to help our farm and food companies fill job vacancies on a permanent basis by supporting our essential TFWs with a strong pathway to permanent residency.

Due to COVID-19, this has been a very difficult year for agriculture and processing. Increasing travel and health regulations make it more and more difficult for companies and their incoming TFWs to fill job vacancies when Canadians do not apply. Currently Ontario's Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) is closed down and the Alberta PNP has shut out our butchers by invoking education equivalency, which disqualifies many butchers with meat cutting experience and skills we need in Canada. For mushrooms and other farm occupations, the general farm worker and harvester has even less access than butcher for the PNPs. For these reasons, the federal AFIP has become even more important, to help agriculture and meat processing retain workers with valuable skills that secure our food supply for Canada and the world.

### Some of our concerns regarding new and emerging challenges include:

1. **We are supportive of the new pathway to permanent status for 90,000 temporary essential workers** announced by Minister Medicino April 14, 2021. We are grateful and thank the Minister for including our farm and food occupations within the 30,000-essential category of TFW. We do have some challenges we would like the Committee to review:
  - a. We anticipate the essential worker category 30,0000 spots to be gone by June 2021 because our sector is competing for essential worker spots with trucking and construction workers who are more adept at using the immigration system.
  - b. We would like to point out that this new immigration initiative does not include any education criteria. **We would support this new approach to be added to our Agri-Food Immigration Pilot.** This would allow our workers to also fully access the 2,750 spots in a controlled way through our small pilot. Because the AFIP is a pilot, we want to be able to try new things, not wait 3 years for failure. We would like IRCC to include a secondary stream for workers, recognizing valuable, Canadian on-the-job experience of 2 years without the bureaucratic and difficult education credential assessment. This would provide more access for our sector's workers within the pilot and make the pilot a success.
  - c. Although supportive of the new PR path, we also recognize that farm and food employers could **have higher turnover this year and next**, if our TFWs choose to use this new program and leave our plants and farms. A related concern is that for 90,000 TFWs to become permanent residents within a 6-month period, could **strain overall immigration processing timelines**. For this reason, we ask that the Department not take away processing resources for the TFWP agriculture and agri-food work permits. Rather we **ask that our TFWP agriculture and agri-food resources be strengthened**, as the current department is already strained. For this reason, it is more important than ever that our agriculture and agri-food workers receive **priority processing and the appropriate resources to fill these job vacancies that are needed to pick, package and process food**.

2. **Budget 2021** has earmarked, \$110 million in spending over the next three years on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (page 219). We are concerned because **none of the line items mentioned are to improve overall processing of work permits for our agriculture and agri-Food workers**. Only open work permits will receive priority processing according to Budget 2021 document<sup>1</sup>. Our TFWP agriculture and agri-Food work permit processing also needs to be improved, not just open work permits. Also because of the volume processing for the 90,000 for the new pathway to PR program, we recommend that the Budget 2021 be amended to include **resources specifically earmarked for the TFWP agriculture and agri-Food work permits**, so our sector receives similar funding allocation recognition as other sectors have received.

We want to see achievable benchmarks both for the TFWP agriculture and agri-food workers and also for AFIP. Particularly, for our TFWP work permit extensions **for our agriculture and agri-food workers already in Canada, we would like to see a 30-day benchmark**. During the pandemic, we have seen over 9 months or longer wait times for our work permit extensions for our in-Canada TFWs and they are regularly dropped to “implied status.” This means they are allowed to work but they lose all of their personal identification such as health cards and social insurance numbers and health cards.

Recently, the timelines for these work permit extensions have improved somewhat. We do not want to lose any recent gains for our **17,000 TFWs butchers and farm workers that need work permit extensions**, due to the new immigration PR program.

Examples of **horrible humanitarian issues for workers on “implied status”** we are asking the Department to prevent, by providing dependable work permit processing timelines.

- A TFW butcher who could not return home to a dying parent because if he did, he would not be allowed back to Canada without a work permit and ID that he would have lost.
- On mushroom farms, there is private healthcare insurance when the worker loses their health cards. But the doctors often require payment up front, so an employer had to pay for the workers’ medical bills up front to get the health care needed for the worker’s pregnancy.

We provide these as real examples of what is happening when our TFWs are dropped by the Department to “implied status” because we do not have a **work permit benchmark** for these 17,000 work permit extensions.

These hard-working farm and food workers who are picking, packaging and processing to produce Canadian food for our grocery stores and the world deserve reasonable work permit processing timelines they can count on, as other sectors receive.

**If this requires more resources for the TFWP processing** then we ask that it be allocated quickly, and that **resources for agriculture and agri-food work permit processing be included in the Budget 2021**, so our workers are consistently prioritized within the IRCC Department.

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<sup>1</sup> [budget-2021-en.pdf, page 219](#)

3. **Concerns with the AFIP:** We are very concerned that as of December 2020, we have been told that approximately only 150 TFWs have been able to access the AFIP – which has been in place for a year now. In our reality, COVID-19 is not the reason why we haven't accessed this pilot. Barriers such as the bureaucratic way this pilot was set up is an important impediment. That is why we have provided very specific administrative recommendations that we would like to see **immediately implemented** to help our workers stay in Canada to continue producing and processing food during this pandemic. These changes were requested and discussed before the pilot was launched and failed to live up to the discussions we had.

The recommendations below have been discussed with the Minister during a meeting in February and agreed in principle. We are asking for your committee to support these recommendations to allow our workers to stay in Canada with a strong ongoing pathway to permanent residency, like any other sector. The simple administrative amendments we are proposing will allow more of our workers to do this and enable our sector to fill our 2,750 immigration spots allocated within the pilot.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE AGRI-FOOD IMMIGRATION PILOT

- 1) **Renewals/ Work Permit Extensions:** Issues with agriculture and butcher work permit renewals have been exacerbated due to COVID-19 causing many terrible situations for workers.
- We recommend:**
- Form imm5710 have the NOC code added on page 3 line 6** beside the LMIA number, so that IRCC officials can have a searchable field to find our agriculture and agri-food NOC Codes that are prioritized in the regulations. We ask this be fixed by July not September because it affects 17,000 farm and food workers.
  - Work permit extensions/ renewals be benchmarked and completed within 30 days.**
- 2) **We recommend: AFIP permanent residence process be clarified immediately with a timeline summary for the steps required.** If the worker is accepted, at the 4-month period or sooner, we ask that the meat processor employers be allowed out of the TFWP Cap and the farm and food employers and workers no longer have to complete LMIAs & work permit renewals/extensions. And this new PR process to be posted on the website and webinars to be provided to agriculture and agri-food employers before June 2021.
- 3) **We recommend: Education process flexibility during COVID-19:** Education institutions in the workers' country of origin remain closed during the pandemic, which is not allowing workers to start the AFIP process with the education assessment companies. For this reason, we would like to recommend a 2-part education assessment process. This could be immediately tweaked to include:
- Allow the worker to use **copies of high school certificates** with wording recommended by the assessment company: "Assessment based on documents submitted by applicant".
  - When the education institutions open, then complete the education assessment process by **having originals mailed to the assessment company.**
- 4) **We recommend: Workers with Open Work Permits and other TFWP Stream workers should be able to apply through the AFIP:** Entry to the AFIP should be based on the **permanent, full time Job Offer from the employer**, not on prescriptive NAICs or streams of the TFWP. These regulations and barriers mean less workers with the agricultural skills and experience that Canada needs can access and use the pilot.