

# PRODUCERS HOPE FOREIGN WORKER P

Employers need and value these staff members, but the hiring process can be time consuming and expensive.

by KAITLYNN ANDERSON





# FOR TEMPORARY PROGRAM REFORMS

National Pork Board and the Pork Checkoff, Des Moines, Iowa, photo

For many years, staff at Sunterra Farms have faced an increasingly common challenge in the pork industry.

Despite using many recruitment methods, the company, which has pig farms and processing plants in Ontario and Alberta, struggles to employ Canadian workers.

Since Sunterra's operations are located far from urban centres, many people are reluctant to commute to the farms every day. Prospective employees often do not want to relocate to rural areas, either.

So the company turned to Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) for help. Sunterra has used this program to maintain its workforce for 14 years.

Indeed, the company relies on the TFWP to stay in business.

"Without the foreign worker program, we would be closed," says Mark Chambers, senior production manager at Sunterra Farms in Acme, Alta. Chambers is also a member of Alberta Pork and the Agriculture Industry Labour Council of Alberta. He is co-chair of the Labour Task Force, which is housed under the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC).

Olymel, a pork producer and processor which has plants in Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta, faces similar challenges.

The employer works with professional agencies to recruit people at trade shows, job fairs and open houses. The company advertises on radio stations, on employment websites, on social media channels, and in local and national newspapers.

The company also developed the profile referral program, which encourages current "employees to refer family, friends and neighbours who are looking for work," Richard Vigneault, a spokesperson for Olymel, tells *Better Pork*. "This program financially rewards staff who refer candidates according to predefined rules."

Although Olymel uses many methods to hire local workers, recruiters still struggle to find Canadians to fill positions.

So the company submits applications to the TFWP.

This program "provides the additional labour our company needs to pursue and plan for growth," Vigneault says.

In total, Olymel has 12,000 employees across Canada.

Olymel recruits 597 of them through the TFWP.

Companies that use the program may hire only a limited number of foreign workers.

"We can recruit temporary foreign workers to fill up to 10 per cent of the positions at each establishment," Vigneault says.

Program requirements also limit the length of time foreign workers can stay in Canada.

In the seasonal agricultural worker stream, participants may legally work in the country for eight months. The employer must provide these individuals with at least 240 hours of work every six weeks.

In this stream, producers can hire citizens from Mexico, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Businesses can also employ workers through the agricultural stream for a maximum of 24 months. In this category, producers can hire individuals from any country. Pork producers generally hire workers through this stream of the program.

Once these staff have completed their legal work terms, many wish to relocate to these rural areas.

Producers and processors, like Sunterra Farms and Olymel, support program participants throughout their journeys.

"We are happy to continue employing them if they are granted permanent residency in Canada," Vigneault says.

Whether these workers stay for a short time or successfully immigrate, they bring many benefits.

"These people want to come to work every day and do their jobs well," Chambers says. "It's been a huge win for us, rural communities and the Canadian economy."

## Identifying the need for improvements

While the TFWP can help Canadian pork producers and their staff, employers who rely on the program report many frustrations.

Farmers often find a drawn-out application process. In fact, applicants can wait six to eight months before they can hire for the role.

"This can be a real challenge, especially for smaller operations," says Mark Ferguson, manager of industry



program and policy analysis for the Saskatchewan Pork Development Board. “You want to fill vacancies immediately so that animals receive proper care and all the tasks in the barn are completed without burning other staff out.”

Before producers may submit applications to Service Canada, they must advertise the positions to Canadians on the national Job Bank and at least one other platform for a minimum of two weeks, says Marvin Salomons, a private consultant at Salomons Group Solutions in Red Deer, Alta. Salomons provides consulting services to farmers on behalf of Alberta Pork.

The producers then fill out Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA) and submit them to the federal government. Officers may approve these documents if they determine that the employers qualify to hire foreign workers to fill the positions.

Once an employer receives a positive LMIA, the company can offer a temporary job to the foreign worker. To find workers, employers such as Olymel travel overseas to collect resumés and interview candidates.

Then the prospective employee must apply to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada for a work permit. To complete this task, each applicant must submit a job offer



Olymel photo

**Over the past 14 years, meat-processing companies have increased their employees' wages by more than 50 per cent, recent Canadian Meat Council research reveals.**

letter, a contract, a copy of the LMIA and the LMIA number, the Government of Canada website states.

The length of time needed to complete this step can vary.

“While the process may take a week or so for some countries, it could take months for other areas,” Salomons says. To learn the processing times for each country, visit [cic.gc.ca/english/information/times](http://cic.gc.ca/english/information/times).

However, if government officers deny applications, producers and processors must restart the applica-

tion process.

This challenge has caused many employers to feel anxious when they fill out the forms, says Gary Stordy, director of government and corporate affairs for the Canadian Pork Council.

Applicants can hire third parties to help them through this process, but these services are an additional expense, he explains.

Alberta Pork will cover one-third of farmers' costs to hire private consultants to help complete LMIA's.

Members of the industry also have



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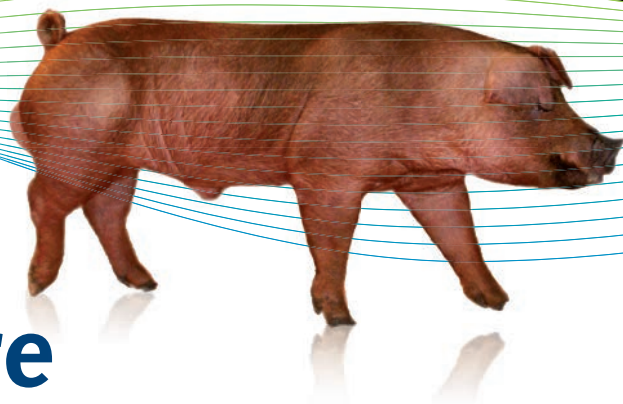


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concerns about inconsistencies in hiring. For example, government officers may not assess all applications equally.

"I know a producer who challenged a denied application," says Chambers. "A different officer became involved and approved the same application without requesting additional information."

This lack of consistency could be due to government officers' lack of knowledge about the pork sector, Stordy says.

"They need to understand our industry more."

Some farmers do not receive explanations for their denied applications either, says Salomons.

To reduce the frequency of application denials, producers hope that

the government will communicate with them more throughout the process.

For example, if employers make a mistake in their applications, officers could contact them to clear it up.

"Producers don't want to miss out on the opportunity to hire foreign workers because they incorrectly filled out a certain section of the forms," says Stordy.

Currently, farmers receive minimal support from the government when they apply.

"The process needs to be more user-friendly," says Chambers.

Many employers and industry professionals echo this concern. "Most employers only want to access the TFWP as a last resort to address ongoing labour shortages in the hog sector," says Martine Varekamp-Bos, a regulated Canadian immigration consultant at Immigration Care in Alberta. Producers often turn to Varekamp-Bos for guidance when they apply to hire temporary foreign workers.



**Marvin Salomons**

"The program doesn't allow for a great level of flexibility, and employers using the program are being held to a very high standard," she says.

Pork producers also have concerns about the housing requirements across the two program streams.

Employers can deduct \$30 per

week from year-round workers' pay cheques to help cover costs of housing these workers, says Janet Krayden, stakeholder engagement specialist at CAHRC.



**Martine Varekamp-Bos**

However, while seasonal workers generally stay in bunk housing, employees in the agricultural stream often live in single rooms in farm houses.

"You don't want to put workers in bunkhouses in the winter," says Krayden.

"While these bunkhouses are good quality, producers are generally providing their year-round employees with a lot more space. But this isn't necessarily being recognized."

Because of the differences in living space, employers find that "this is one of the areas where the rules of the current programming are not conducive to year-round employment," says Krayden.

This situation poses a financial challenge for many small-scale operators, too.

"It's very difficult for producers to recoup the cost of a mortgage or rent, and this does not help year-round workers integrate into communities," she says.

This setup could also mislead foreign workers who return to Canada as permanent residents, as they will have to find accommodations in nearby towns. These workers could face sticker shock when they look for homes for their families, says Chambers.

"We need to be able to charge fair-market price," he says.

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## WELCOMING NEWCOMERS TO RURAL CANADA

Many employers help their temporary foreign workers adapt to life in rural Canada.

Olymel, for example, travels abroad to interview candidates in their home countries. Human resource directors talk to these prospective employees about life in Canada and working conditions at the plants.

"We have created staff positions specifically to help our temporary foreign workers" adjust to their new jobs, says Richard Vigneault, a spokesperson for Olymel.

Once the workers arrive in Canada, staff offer their full support.

"We help them with housing and inform them about health services, pharmacies, grocery stores and the like," he says. "They can count on us to help them adapt."

The employer tries to group couples and friends together as well.

The communities also warmly greet these employees. For example, many people gathered to welcome foreign workers who arrived at the company's Vallée-Jonction, Que., pork slaughtering and cutting plant in March.

"Mayors, municipal councillors, staff at a local grocery store and volunteers worked together to welcome and support them," Vigneault says. "It was extraordinary. The workers were pleasantly surprised." **BP**



Olymel photo

These temporary foreign workers, who are employed at Olymel, arrived in Vallée-Jonction, Que. in March. They received a warm welcome at the town hall from the mayor of this municipality.

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The agricultural industry faced a shortage of 30,000 workers 10 years ago. Now, that figure has climbed to 59,000, Janet Krayden says. Within the next decade, that number could jump to 114,000.

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**Discussing program improvements**

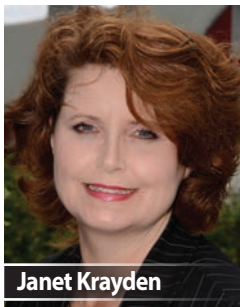
Industry members hope that the government will make appropriate changes to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program as a result of recent consultations.

In May and June, producers, industry representatives and federal officials participated in face-to-face discussions about the TFWP.

Until July, the government encouraged members of the agricultural industry to complete an online survey. Producers could also provide written submissions outlining their thoughts on four areas: program eligibility and structure, wages and deductions, housing in primary agriculture and LMIA processing.

Many swine producers participated in these consultations to learn more about the program, says Krayden. They also attended other meetings.

During an Ontario Pork Industry Council workshop held in Mitchell in March, for example, attendees



Janet Krayden

discussed some of the misconceptions about the program.

"There is a bit of a myth that people use the TFWP for cheap labour, but that's not the case," Krayden says to *Better Pork*. "During the employer panel, farmers explained that it actually costs more to bring in temporary foreign workers than to hire people locally."

In fact, producers end up paying between \$8,000 and \$12,000 per worker to bring them to Canada and house them, she explains. This price does not include recruitment fees or wages.

However, farmers willingly accept these costs.

"They'll pay the price to get people who are reliable and interested in these jobs," she says.

"Employees must handle live animals, so producers need workers they can count on."

Throughout the consultation period, industry representatives also addressed the need to review job classifications.

Currently, the government considers most agricultural workers low skilled, says Krayden. This assumption is often incorrect.

"A lot of these jobs require highly skilled workers," she says.

"For example, swine technicians need to have animal husbandry skills. They need to understand diseases and

swine health."

This classification presents a challenge to foreign workers who want to become permanent residents.

"Low- and semi-skilled workers won't necessarily get enough points to immigrate through the Canadian system," says Krayden.

Employers also hope that the government improves immigration because "agriculture is the main sector without a clear pathway to permanent residency," Krayden says.

By refining the system to include the agricultural industry, the government could help employers reduce labour shortages.

For example, CAHRC researchers found that meat processors retain more than 90 per cent of their foreign workers who immigrate to Canada, she explains.

"On average, these individuals stay at the plants for at least 10 years," she says.

Before the feds make any final changes to the program, members of the industry hope that officials will pursue more discussions with stakeholders.

"I hope the government comes back to the industry, shares the changes it would like to make and asks for further input," says Chambers. "We have to go back to the table and work through the TFWP as a team." **BP**