



March 17, 2020

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau
Minister of Agriculture and Agrifood Canada
1341 Baseline Road Tower 7, Floor 9, Room 149
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0C5

Dear Minister Bibeau,

South Central Ontario Region Economic Development Corporation (SCOR EDC) is a not for profit economic development corporation owned by the counties of Brant, Elgin, Middlesex, Norfolk, and Oxford.

Geographically, we are roughly the size of the GTA with about one tenth of the population. Our economies are based in agriculture and manufacturing. In the rural and small urban communities that we represent there are approximately 604,000 residents. When including the larger separated cities we are just over 1.5million. We are located on the sand plains and as such can grow almost any crop. We have a strong tradition of food and crop production and diversification.

We are in support of your governments endeavors to flatten the curve and mitigate the COVID-19 virus. However we are deeply concerned about this also applying to the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program.

The workers that come to this region to help plant, tend, and harvest crops are critical to the success of the crops and of the farms. If we miss this critical opportunity it will not only affect the farms and their economic viability but will negatively impact food production, both fresh and canned supply. We need to act now before the time has passed.

These workers already go through rigorous medical screening before entering the program and our country. They do not travel via commercial airlines but charter flights. We believe there are options to ramp up the current level of screening while still maintaining the program so that we can continue to grow food and crops to supply Canadians.

We have included an information sheet regarding crops and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program for your review that was developed by the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association in partnership with Canadian Federation of Agriculture and a number of other organizations.



We would strongly encourage you to work with agricultural organizations, our Members of Parliament, our Provincial Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and organizations such as ourselves to quickly develop solutions to enable our farms to continue crop production.

Farmers, business and community leaders want to help. The risk can be mitigated and farmers are willing to step up and do their part and commit to solutions such as on-farm isolation or other options that may be needed. We understand this is a difficult time and we feel there are viable solutions to offer that would ensure safety of Canadians and assurance that there will be food and crops to harvest this year. Now more than ever the continuation of food and crop production will be critical to all Canadians as well as food and agricultural businesses related businesses.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Molnar'.

Stephen Molnar
Chair SCOR EDC

Cc

Minister Maryam Monsef
Hon. Diane Finley
MP Phil McColeman
MP Karen Vecchio
MP Lianne Rood
MP Dave MacKenzie
Hon. Ernie Hardeman
Hon. Monte McNaughton
Hon. Jeff Yurek
MPP Will Bouma
MPP Toby Barrett
Alison Robertson Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
Keith Currie Ontario Federation of Agriculture
Norman Beal Food and Beverage Ontario
Rocco Rossi Ontario Chamber of Commerce
Mary Robinson Canadian Federation of Agriculture

Farmers want to help

Farmers support the government as it does its best to navigate these unprecedented times. We recognize the need to take every reasonable precaution to address the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and want to help.

Food security at stake without foreign workers

Foreign agricultural workers play a critical role in the production of fruit and vegetables in Canada. They represent 40% of the horticulture sector's workforce. Without them, farmers will not be able to get the work done during planting (and pruning, etc) season which is upon us. **Once planting season is missed, it is too late and the entire 2020 crop will be at risk.** The consequences would become apparent once grocery shelves are empty during harvest time. We won't be able to rely on other countries like the U.S. or Europe to fill our shelves during these extraordinary times. It would be prudent for the government to act now to ensure robust domestic food production rather than reduce or eliminate it.

Time sensitivity for action

Many fruit and vegetable growers are expecting temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in the near future. Over the next four weeks, 4,600 workers were scheduled to arrive, with another 8,800 scheduled to arrive in the two months after that. Without these workers, there will be a great number of acres that won't even be planted and many of the perennial crops and orchards won't be able to be prepared for the crop year and/or harvested. For those who transplant seedlings, they should be starting their first seedlings around now if they haven't already. Without labour to transplant and harvest, many operations will shutter. **This will impact not only the fresh market, but also the frozen, processed and canned supplies for the coming year.**

The possibility of similar shortages in the U.S. will severely limit Canada's ability to deal with this issue in a few weeks or months, e.g. with imports. We must act now.

Self-isolation on farms

The temporary foreign worker programs for agriculture are uniquely suited to achieve the government's goal of social distancing and self-isolation, in particular the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). The vast majority of workers in the program are housed at the home farm where they work, with no "neighbours" other than perhaps the farm employers themselves. With workers self-contained in this manner, the industry is in a good position to establish protocols that would lower the risk to the Canadian public to virtually nothing, or at least so far that the risk is far outweighed by the benefit of food security for Canadians.

Finding a solution

Canadian fruit and vegetable growers are ready to work with the government to ensure that disruptions to Canada's food supply are minimal while addressing the threat of COVID-19. We urge the government to work with the agriculture sector to develop a solution for an **orderly resumption of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program for Primary Agriculture (SAWP and TFWP Agriculture Stream)**. As part of the solution, industry will work to establish an isolation protocol to ensure that the health of our workers, the local communities and public health is top of mind. And we will work with the international liaison officers of the workers' countries of origin to ensure the safe transfer of workers to Canada.

The fresh produce industry has an exemplary record of risk management as can be seen in the success of CanadaGAP, risk-based protocol to safe guard the food supply of Canadians. We look forward to building on this record during these extraordinary times. We need government's leadership and partnership.