

Agriculture and agri-food labour statistics, 2020

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Temporary foreign workers help put food on Canadians' tables during the pandemic

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was a year of challenges for many agricultural and food processing industries employing temporary foreign workers. Nevertheless, despite some production slowdowns as a result of COVID-19 outbreaks, these industries successfully adapted to safely deliver fresh local produce and processed products.

Every year, the agricultural sector depends on approximately 50,000 temporary foreign workers from around the world who come to Canada to work in the agricultural and food and beverage manufacturing industries. According to data from the Labour Force Survey and from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, foreign workers represented 17.9% of workers in the agricultural industries and 8.2% of workers in the food and beverage manufacturing industries in 2020.

The onset of the pandemic coincided with the period of highest demand for seasonal foreign workers in agriculture and with the closure of Canada's borders to slow the spread of COVID-19, making 2020 a particularly challenging year.

Although the number of temporary foreign workers was down from a year earlier, their work was deemed essential during the pandemic.

In 2020, Canada was able to bring 50,126 foreign workers in the agricultural industries, down 6.5% from 2019. There were 23,985 foreign workers in food and beverage processing plants, down 6.1% from a year earlier.

The vast majority of temporary foreign workers are employed in crop production

The vast majority of temporary foreign workers in the agricultural industries were employed in crop production (91.6%). Approximately one-third of them worked in greenhouse, nursery and floriculture production (35.9%); about one-quarter worked in fruit and tree nut farming (23.8%); and close to one-quarter worked in vegetable and melon farming (22.4%).

In 2020, greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations reported the largest decline in temporary foreign workers relative to the previous year, down 1,231 to 18,003. Fruit and tree nut farms (-861 to 11,916) and vegetable and melon farms (-684 to 11,222) also reported significant declines.

Ontario reports the largest decline in temporary foreign workers during the pandemic

Approximately 22,834 temporary foreign workers in agriculture were employed in Ontario in 2020, down 1,418 compared with 2019—this was the largest decrease nationally. In 2020, almost half of all temporary foreign workers in agriculture in Canada worked in Ontario (45.6%).

Over 1 in 5 temporary workers nationally were employed at greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations (21.3%) in Ontario in 2020, while almost 1 in 10 worked at either vegetable and melon farms (9.0%) or fruit and tree nut farms (8.1%). Ontario greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations reported the largest decline in workers in 2020 (-662 to 10,656), followed by vegetable and melon farms (-281 to 4,529), and fruit and tree nut farms (-254 to 4,084).

British Columbia reported the second-largest overall decline in temporary foreign workers in agriculture, down 799 to 8,564. Nationally, just under one in five foreign workers was employed in British Columbia (17.1%), with the largest share working in fruit and tree nut farming (8.2%) and greenhouse, nursery and floriculture production (6.1%). Fruit and tree nut farms (-382 to 4,094) and greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations (-283 to 3,038) reported the largest worker decline in 2020.

In Quebec, the number of temporary foreign workers in agriculture fell by 709 to 13,094 in 2020. Just over one-quarter (26.1%) of temporary foreign workers in agriculture were employed on Quebec farms in 2020, with the largest share working on vegetable and melon farms (9.7%), followed by greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations (6.0%), and fruit and tree nut farms (5.8%). Vegetable and melon farms (-263 to 4,855) and greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations (-163 to 3,303) in Quebec reported the largest decline in temporary foreign workers in agriculture compared with the previous year.

Almost half of all temporary foreign workers in agriculture come from Mexico

People from around the world come to work in Canada's agricultural sector every year, and 2020 was no exception. In 2020, close to half (48.6%) of all foreign workers in agriculture came from Mexico, 19.3% came from Guatemala and 14.9% came from Jamaica.

In 2020, there were fewer temporary foreign workers in agriculture from almost every country compared with 2019, with Mexico (-1,095 to 24,372) and Jamaica (-987 to 7,460) posting the largest declines.

Temporary foreign workers also play an important role in food and beverage manufacturing

The Canadian food and beverage manufacturing industries employed 23,985 temporary foreign workers in 2020, down 1,570 compared with the previous year. The meat product manufacturing industry (-443 to 5,964 workers) reported the largest decline in temporary foreign workers compared with before the pandemic.

Meat product manufacturers (24.9%) and bakeries and tortilla manufacturers (24.0%) combined employed almost half of all temporary foreign workers in the food and beverage manufacturing industries nationally in 2020.

In 2020, just over one-third (35.7%) of temporary foreign workers employed in the Canadian food and beverage manufacturing industries worked in Ontario. However, Ontario brought fewer workers (-534 to 8,555) in 2020 compared with the previous year. Bakeries and tortilla manufacturing had the most workers (2,713), followed by meat product manufacturing (1,312).

Over one-quarter (27.8%) of temporary foreign workers nationally were preparing and packaging food and beverages in Quebec in 2020, down 361 to 6,658. Approximately 1 in 10 worked in meat product manufacturing (11.5%) or bakeries and tortilla manufacturing (6.3%).

British Columbia employed 15.1% of the temporary foreign workers employed in food and beverage manufacturing in 2020, and the province employed 338 fewer people compared with 2019. These foreign workers accounted nationally for 4.4% of foreign workers in bakeries and tortilla manufacturing, 3.4% of foreign workers in other food manufacturing, and 2.9% of foreign workers in beverage manufacturing.

Available tables: [32-10-0218-01](#), [32-10-0220-01](#) and [32-10-0221-01](#).

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5353](#).

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