

**Driving Insights  
Project Close Out Report**

**National Workforce Strategic Plan for  
Agri- Food and Beverage –  
Sharing Insights, Building Awareness,  
Engagement and Collaboration**

**Canadian Agricultural Human Resource  
Council (CAHRC)**

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FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and Signal49 Research.

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## Executive Summary

Canada's agriculture, food and beverage manufacturing sectors are foundational to national food security, economic resilience, and global competitiveness, yet continue to face chronic workforce shortages, skills gaps, and growing pressure to adopt new technologies while advancing sustainability. These challenges contributed to an estimated \$6.6 billion in lost sales in 2022 and underscore the need for coordinated system-level action. The industry-led National Workforce Strategic Plan (NWSP) provides a multi-year, sector-driven framework to address these challenges and achieve vacancy rates below the national average by 2030.

The Driving Insights project represented the second phase of NWSP implementation and focused on knowledge mobilization to build awareness, alignment, and collaboration across the workforce ecosystem. Activities included a national NWSP Summit, webinars, myth-busting events, e-magazines, and broad communications outreach targeting employers, educators, job seekers, policy makers, and industry partners. These efforts amplified research from the first phase of the NWSP and reinforced momentum toward shared workforce priorities.

Key messages emerging from the Summit and related engagement emphasized the importance of collaboration, investment in people, and innovation to build a resilient workforce. Stakeholders highlighted priorities including strengthening workforce attraction through inclusive recruitment and career awareness, investing in skills development aligned with evolving technologies and environmental priorities, building leadership and HR capacity among employers, and leveraging data and labour market intelligence to inform decision-making. Innovation and adaptability—particularly through automation, business agility, and responsible growth—were identified as critical enablers of sector resilience.

Despite challenges related to compressed timelines and data collection, the project successfully broadened stakeholder engagement, strengthened cross-sector networks, and demonstrated strong demand for in-person collaboration. The outcomes reinforce that sustained investment, coordinated partnerships, and continued knowledge sharing are essential to advancing NWSP goals and ensuring Canada's agri-food and beverage sectors have a thriving, inclusive, and future-ready workforce.

## Key Insights

The focus of this work was not research but knowledge mobilization. Therefore, key insights relevant to policy makers are not as directly obvious. However, there were some overall insights from content shared at the National Workforce Strategic Plan (NWSP) Summit and the myth-busting events that may be of interest to policy makers. These insights are summarized here:

Canada's agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing sectors face persistent labour shortages and skills gaps alongside rapid technology adoption and rising sustainability expectations, creating risks for productivity, growth, and food security. The sector-driven National Workforce Strategic Plan (NWSP) provides a multi-year framework to address these system-level challenges through coordinated action. Over 100 organizations support the NWSP through participation and engagement across Canada.

The Driving Insights phase focused on knowledge mobilization (not new research) to amplify NWSP evidence, build awareness, and strengthen collaboration across employers, educators, job seekers, associations, and policy makers. Engagement channels included a national NWSP Summit, webinars, myth-busting events, e-magazines, and ongoing communications.

Stakeholders emphasized that collaboration, investment in people, and innovation are central to a resilient workforce. Priority directions include expanding work-integrated learning and early exposure to careers; broadening recruitment beyond traditional agriculture backgrounds; strengthening youth and new-entrant pathways; aligning training with evolving technologies and environmental priorities; building employer leadership/HR capacity; and leveraging labour market intelligence to guide decisions.

Sustained partnership, policy alignment, and continued knowledge sharing are needed to refine implementation priorities, measure impact, and maintain momentum toward NWSP goals for an inclusive, future-ready workforce.

## The Issue

Canada's agriculture, food and beverage manufacturing sectors are foundational to national food security, economic resilience and global competitiveness. Yet persistent and growing workforce shortages threaten their viability, resulting in an estimated \$6.6 billion in lost sales in 2022 alone. These shortages are not solely a matter of labour supply; they are compounded by rapid shifts in technology, automation, digitalization and the urgent need to embed sustainability and climate solutions into production systems. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated, system-level action rather than fragmented, short-term responses.

The industry-led National Workforce Strategic Plan for Agriculture and Food and Beverage Manufacturing (NWSP) provide Canada with a clear, actionable roadmap to address both immediate labour gaps and long-standing structural issues, with the shared goal of achieving vacancy rates below the national average by 2030. Significant progress has already been made through extensive collaboration, research and working groups, with momentum reaffirmed through the 2024 progress review.

## **Project Rationale**

This project is essential to protect and advance that momentum of the NWSP. Investing in a robust, multi-pronged knowledge mobilization approach—anchored by in-person engagement, webinars and coordinated communications ensured that critical research findings from the first phase of work were amplified, collaboration across the ecosystem was strengthened, duplication was reduced and remaining knowledge gaps were addressed. Most importantly, this work supported inclusive economic growth by broadening awareness, participation and alignment across employers, educators, job seekers and policymakers, enabling these vital sectors to build the workforce Canada needs now and into the future.

The original project that supported the Driving Insights work was focused on the creation of a national workforce strategy for agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing. This included bringing together more than 100 stakeholders from across the agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing value chain to work together to develop the strategy. Once the strategy pillars were developed and defined, working groups were established for each pillar. Each working group developed an action plan, which included short-term requirements for research. The research was conducted as part of this first phase and was the foundation of the knowledge mobilization content for this phase of the work. Both the research and the on-going dialogue around the NWSP is directly relevant to policy development as it identifies priorities, gaps and opportunities for ensuring the agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing sectors have the workforce required to be prosperous, support Canadian food security and sovereignty and support the Canadian economy.

## **Project Description**

Partner organizations for this work included the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) and Food and Beverage Canada (FBC). The intended audience for knowledge mobilization included agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing employers, post-secondary institutions (academia and career advisors), government, industry and commodity

associations, immigrant-serving agencies, employment agencies and skills and training providers.

The knowledge mobilization activities and key strategies for engagement included events, webinars, speaking engagement and communication pieces (e-magazine, newsletters, social media content, media interviews, podcasts).

Expected outcomes and impacts include:

Increased collaboration, dialogue and engagement through an expanded ecosystem.

Increased awareness and understanding of the sectors by all stakeholders, supporting an inclusive economy and expanding participation in the sectors by all workforce participants.

Continued momentum and progress on achieving NWSP actions and priorities to support achieving the 2030 goals.

The underlying assumption was that these activities would further expand awareness of the research conducted in phase one of this work. It was also assumed that there was a continued need for facilitating collaboration and networking opportunities to further the work of the NWSP.

This project focused on knowledge mobilization of research findings from phase one that addressed information gaps. This information will also help inform policy development, education and training programs alignment with workforce requirements and attraction and retention activities.

The project activities are mostly national in scope, with the webinars and Summit attracting a national audience. The myth-busting sessions had a more regional focus. The original intent was to focus on these in regions impacted by tariffs. While there was some focus on these areas, it was more difficult than expected to engage directly in some of the more impacted regions. The very short timelines of the extension as well as the bandwidth of contacts in those regions to support event planning made it difficult. There was significant interest, but more time would have been needed to execute events in some of these originally targeted regions.

## **Approach / Methodology**

The methods used for knowledge mobilization included using multiple delivery methods.

The knowledge mobilization activities included the following:

- 1 National Workforce Strategic Plan Summit
- 5 Webinars
- 5 Myth-Busting events
- 4 e-magazines
- Social media content

- Presentations, speaking engagements, podcasts, articles, community of practice discussions.

Four of the webinars were hosted prior to the Summit. This approach was followed to engage stakeholders in priority topics from the NWSP work and to build awareness of the topics that would be discussed at the Summit. The fifth webinar was held post-Summit. This was done to share insights into the Summit, particularly for those that were unable to attend, and to continue the discussion and engagement on the NWSP priorities.

The Summit was a 1.5-day event that brought together a wide range of stakeholders to learn from each other and make new connections. The main objective of the NWSP is to foster collaboration and networks and through having a diverse range of stakeholder groups together in the same room this objective was met. Many reported the value in connecting with the people in the room, in many cases meeting for the first time.

The myth-busting events were meant to focus on engaging job seekers that may not have considered agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing as a career. The original goal was to focus on these events in regions impacted by tariffs. This was more difficult than anticipated as new relationships and contacts needed to be made, the timelines to complete the work were short and many of the contacts in these areas were preoccupied with responding to requests from ever-changing geopolitical issues. Four events were held but flexibility was required in the execution and planning. One event was held virtually to also increase the amount of engagement.

The e-magazines provided longer form communications through articles focused on NWSP pillars. This provided a way to further highlight work being done by various organizations and priorities of the NWSP. It also provided a vehicle to demonstrate progress and activity of the NWSP.

Social media content was developed and distributed to raise awareness of events and to share information from research conducted in the first phase of this work. It was another method to engage stakeholders and to keep stakeholders up to date on the activities, priorities and findings of the NWSP.

Other engagement through more third-party channels provided another avenue for knowledge mobilization. Presenting at conferences, attending industry events, sharing information through podcasts and media interviews may be less tangible in the impact and engagement but were important ways to continue to build awareness of the NWSP activities and priorities, as well as provide venues to share research findings from the first phase of this work.

Details on participants were not available from all of the knowledge mobilization activities. However, the following is a breakdown of attendance at the Summit:

| <b>Equity-Seeking Participants</b>        |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| Indigenous Persons Summit attendee        | 2  |
| Women Summit attendee                     | 65 |
| LGBTQ2S+ Persons Summit attendee          | 1  |
| Youth (aged 15-29) Summit attendee        | 6  |
| Immigrants Summit attendee                | 19 |
| Racialized Persons Summit attendee        | 19 |
| Persons with disabilities or Deaf Persons | 6  |

Note, some participants identified themselves in multiple areas, so the total here exceeds the total number of Summit attendees.

EDI&R was incorporated into these activities by ensuring inclusive language and imagery in content produced, including organizations that serve under-represented groups in event content and building relationships with organizations that serve under-represented groups. Beyond the events, CAHRC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Agri-food (NCIAF) and built new relationships with ACCESS Employment and Stem Minds. CAHRC continued to build relationships with organizations that represent youth, including Agriculture in the Classroom Canada and 4-H Canada.

The impact of these activities is reported below in the “Evidence and Insights” section of this report.

## **Evidence & insights**

The focus of this project, which was a second phase to work previously funded by FSC, was knowledge mobilization of the research conducted in the first phase of this work. This included the following:

- 10 events/webinars/workshops
  - 1 NWSP Summit with 94 attendees
  - 5 webinars with a total of 240 live attendees and 366 views from the YouTube page
  - 4 myth-busting events with a total of 62 attendees
- 4 e-magazines that reached a total of 5,250 people.
- 1,731 website visits
- 25,473 social media impressions
- 1,569 people reached through presentations, which is not reflective of the total

number as in many cases attendance was not available.

- 18,625 reached through newsletter content provided bi-weekly over the duration of the project.

It should be noted that this is only the data CAHRC was able to collect. The information is also used by a number of stakeholders engaged in this work and is often used to support policy making recommendations, to describe the work of the industry and referenced in other speeches, presentations and media interviews. CAHRC is unable to track this data.

Details were not captured by organizations or industry type. The target audience included agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing employers; post-secondary institutions (both academic and career services); commodity and industry associations; training and skills development organizations; immigrant-serving agencies and employment services agencies.

CAHRC did not conduct follow-up surveys to formally measure the overall experience with the events. Anecdotal feedback was very positive, with some recommendations for improvements moving forward. The on-going commitment and the excitement for the next Summit is a strong indication that these activities were well received.

The feedback from the Summit was that many made new connections. There was a strong effort as part of the planning to ensure new stakeholders were in attendance. The feedback from attendees both during the event and after was the significant value in attending not only to learn but to make connections that were then followed up on.

### **NWSP Summit Evaluation**

| <b>Evaluation Area</b>                       | <b>Average Score</b> |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Overall Impression of the Event              | <b>4.5 / 5</b>       |
| Relevance & Informativeness of Presentations | <b>4.6 / 5</b>       |
| Adequacy of Pre-Event Information            | <b>3.9 / 5</b>       |
| Time for Discussion & Networking             | <b>4.6 / 5</b>       |
| Facilities & Location Suitability            | <b>4.6 / 5</b>       |

Key themes that came out of the Summit were:

- Concerns around declining competitiveness
- Labour and skills shortages

- Global market risks
- Slow innovation adoption
- Shifting government policy

There were key themes that also emerged for practical solutions and collaboration. These included:

- Supporting for technology and innovation adoption
- Addressing data gaps
- Supporting more work integrated learning opportunities
- Increasing culturally responsive and accessible programs to attract under-represented groups to rural communities
- Employer leadership in workforce development, partnering with government and education

The top Summit takeaways were:

1. Canada Must Invest Boldly: To maintain competitiveness, Canada requires coordinated investments in R&D, workforce development, and technology.
2. Upskilling is Non-Negotiable: Digital literacy and technology skills must be prioritized at all workforce levels.
3. Inclusion Drives Resilience: Workforce programs must be designed to engage underrepresented groups and reflect diverse lived experiences.
4. Data Drives Action: Reliable labour market data is essential to inform policy, funding, and workforce planning.
5. Collaboration is Essential: Sector resilience depends on strategic partnerships between government, industry, and education.

Recommendations and next steps from the Summit were:

- Develop and scale sector-specific training focused on digital skills, AI, and automation.
- Expand work-integrated learning opportunities across agri-food sectors.
- Foster equity-focused workforce programs to attract diverse talent.
- Advocate for improved, agriculture-relevant labour market data collection.
- Support employer engagement in workforce development initiatives.
- Continue building the National Workforce Strategic Plan with measurable, sector-driven actions.

This demonstrates the strong interest and demand for in-person networking and collaboration opportunities.: The reviews for attendees at the NWSP Summit support the value people find in being in a room together, networking, collaborating and participating in knowledge mobilization.

The budget is there for stakeholders to travel for in-person meetings they value.: This was the first time CAHRC has held an event where it was free to attend but attendees had to cover their own travel. We were unsure if this would be a barrier to many of our stakeholders and therefore impact our goal of 100 attendees at the NWSP Summit in June. We learned from this experience that our stakeholders truly value our NWSP work and will find the funds to cover their own travel to attend.

From this work CAHRC formalized collaborations with the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Agri-food (NCIAF), Bioenterprise Canada, ACCESS Employment and Stem Minds. CAHRC did not track the post-event collaborations between other organizations.

The myth-busting events that were added to the extension of this agreement were something that CAHRC had not hosted in the past. The concept had been tested by others for other industries and there was interest from these groups to pilot the same concept for agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing. Unfortunately, the timing of these events (very close to the holiday season) and the short timelines to plan and execute events did impact what CAHRC anticipated would be the full impact. Although we were successful in hosting four of five events, the short period of time to organize and host five events with newer stakeholders was a challenge. With the quarter leading into the holiday season, it was also more challenging than anticipated to engage partners and participants. One of the goals of these events was to provide information about potential career opportunities for those impacted by tariffs, many of the potential partners for hosting events were preoccupied responding to tariff threats and ever-changing demands from geopolitical pressures.

Key takeaways from the myth-busting events included:

- Broaden and diversify the talent pipeline: Engagement attracted diverse job seekers and reinforced that workforce growth will depend on recruiting beyond traditional agriculture backgrounds and building sector awareness across the full food value chain.
- Accelerate digital and skills transition: Demand is rising for digital and tech-enabled roles; strengthening skills development (including soft skills, communications, and digitalization) is essential to support sector modernization and competitiveness.
- Scale Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as a system lever: Expanding WIL—potentially through more consistent or mandatory participation—can improve early exposure and job readiness; priority is ensuring all agriculture programs offer WIL and enabling non-ag programs/trades to gain agriculture exposure.
- Strengthen youth pathways and succession supports: There is a clear opportunity to engage youth under 18 both inside and outside the sector, and to enable practical succession pathways by connecting aspiring young farmers with those exiting the industry.
- Leverage networks to convert interest into entry: Agriculture remains relationship-driven; connecting job seekers to sector events, mentors, and online networks (e.g., LinkedIn, sector leaders/news) is a key enabler for career entry and retention.

With regards to building new relationships, some of the stakeholders were groups that were new to CAHRC just prior to starting this work. In some cases, such as Stem Minds in York Region, were very successful at supporting the event. Others are taking longer than expected to engage to the level of hosting events.

Another interesting observation was that CAHRC played a role in bringing local stakeholders together to begin their own initiatives similar to work being conducted here. It can often be assumed that regional/local groups are already connected on this front. This project demonstrated there is a role to play in bringing stakeholders together regardless of their location and proximity to each other.

The goal was to host 5 in-person events. Four events were held, three of which were in-person and one of which was a virtual event. It is very good to report that the myth busting event idea was very well received and the regions that were unable to host within the timelines of this project, as well as additional regions, remain interested in making this happen. Funding to continue this work is being pursued in order to continue the momentum on this idea that was tested through the FSC funding.

There were a few achievements to be proud of from this work. The work was able to engage with people new to agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing, expanding awareness of careers in the industry. Agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing continue to be a strong employer and economic contributor in turbulent times in Canada. Providing information and helping all stakeholders to connect (job seekers, post-secondary institutions, training providers, regional municipalities, industry representatives) provided some level of positive impact as well.

### **Lessons learned/Recommendations**

The key successes from this project included broadening stakeholders engaged in the NWSP work, increasing collaboration and networks between stakeholders and with CAHRC, extending the discussion and awareness of agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing workforce needs.

The duration of the project, from funding approval to the finish of the project was very short. The extension and additional work were very much welcomed but the very short timeframes hindered the success of the additional activities. In the future CAHRC will ensure goals and expectations match the timelines provided. For example, with less than three months for delivery including the Christmas break, three events would have been forecasted instead of five. The workload was also very ambitious for the staff costs covered by the funding. CAHRC did contribute a significant amount of staff time outside of the positions funded to ensure delivery of the activities.

From a reporting perspective, CAHRC would improve evaluation methods to ensure all the data required from FSC was collected at the time. For example, webinar registration did not capture

demographics and there was no way to gather demographics from knowledge mobilization events such as presentations through third-party organizations.

Recommendations for other organizations would be to ensure the effort matches the funded positions and to ensure adequate time is available to successfully deliver the number of activities included in the project.

Recommendations for recreating the program/initiative would be to ensure reporting requirements are set up to be easily collected and measured from the outset. It would also be, as stated above, to ensure the ambition of the activities is matched with adequate staff and time to execute. CAHRC was able to, for the most part, execute very successfully, but it did require significant staff time outside of positions funded.

Recommendations to scale the initiative include having long-term funding to manage the work. This would ensure no stops and starts in the project priorities and activities. This work has a significant amount of stakeholder involvement and when there are gaps in funding cycles these stakeholders can feel disengaged or uncertain of the longevity and commitment to the overall objectives.

Other recommendations would be to engage your stakeholders directly in the work. Welcome collaboration and input from all your project stakeholders. Ensure you are continually communicating the work you are doing to keep awareness and active engagement in your project.

When hosting an event, provide as much lead time to stakeholders as possible of the date and location. There will also be some that can't attend due to conflicts in schedules but the more advance notice, the better.

Be open to conversations and input from others. In line with welcoming collaboration, be active listeners with stakeholders and be open to shifting focus, deliverables, activities and actions based on changing needs that may occur. We are living in ever-changing, volatile times and being open to change and adaptability to meet this environment will ensure your project is successful in the end.

Advice for those hosting new events or initiatives would be to allow adequate time to build new relationships if the plan is to engage and host events in a new region or with a new stakeholder group. It is also necessary to consider timing of the events to avoid conflicting schedules and impacts of the holiday season. It may also be necessary to adjust the approach should challenges arise in the original plan. For example, CAHRC hosted a virtual event to ensure a broader reach for participation when it was a challenge to organize in-person events.

Overall CAHRC was quite successful in the knowledge mobilization aspects of this initiative. Recommendations for others would be to ensure you know the audience and how to engage. If it is a new audience that will be engaged, have a plan to reach the new audience and build

relationships with them before you can expect significant impact or output from this activity. Having multiple channels for knowledge mobilization is also important. By having multiple ways to engage in the information and activities, more stakeholders will be reached and engaged. It also helps build overall awareness of the initiative.

CAHRC is committed to continuing the work of the National Workforce Strategic Plan. The NWSP was the foundation to inform priorities for a five-year funding agreement with Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). This funding will see the continuation of an annual NWSP Summit, as well as the convening of the NWSP Working Groups. CAHRC will also continue to pursue funding to support additional research and tool creation, as identified as priorities from the NWSP work.

The assets developed through this phase of FSC funding will continue to be used and accessible to the public. For example, the e-magazines and the webinars will continue to be accessible.

The myth-busting event pilot was very well received by stakeholders and participants. CAHRC will continue to deliver this format of event with partners as funding and interest is secured.

