

Project Insights Report

Development of a National Agriculture and Agri-Food Workforce Strategy



PARTNERS

Canadian Agriculture
Human Resources
Council (CAHRC)



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

\$1,906,470



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Executive Summary

This project set in motion a series of initiatives to generate evidence to develop a national workforce strategy for Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector. It culminated in the [National Workforce Strategic Plan \(NWSP\)](#), an industry-led roadmap to achieve workforce stability by 2030. The main objective was to address persistent labour shortages in the sector, which have been driven by demographic shifts, rural depopulation, and competition from other sectors. These factors are hindering the sector's growth and threatening the country's food security and economic health.

Two studies generated evidence on workforce development: an assessment of readiness for technological adoption in agriculture, and an evaluation of rural infrastructure barriers critical to business growth and community development. Two other streams of quantitative and qualitative research focused on workers (on perceptions of and barriers to careers in the sector) and on employers (on current and future workforce challenges and retention strategies over the next 5–10 years).

The project showed that action is needed on both sides of the labour market to address labour shortages. Among potential workers, there is a need to dispel misconceptions about pay, working conditions, and work-life balance. Employers need to tackle high turnover through stronger workplace cultures and greater investment in employee well-being.

To translate this research into action, additional funding was secured to launch a knowledge mobilization phase across the workforce ecosystem. Through a national NWSP Summit, webinars and e-magazines, the initiative reached industry partners across Canada, generating over 25,000 social media impressions and reaching more than 18,000 people through regular newsletter outreach.

This phase also strengthened a cross-sector partnership with the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Agri-food (NCIAF), and sustained the momentum that led to a five-year funding agreement with Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to continue advancing NWSP priorities.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Low awareness of agricultural careers outside of farming is what fuels outdated stereotypes and dampens interest in the sector. Actively demystifying the work and who it is for is a key priority.
- 2** Higher-than-average turnover rates in the agricultural sector occur because jobs don't meet employee expectations of working conditions and salary.
- 3** Workforce growth will require recruitment beyond traditional agriculture networks, through targeted outreach to groups including Indigenous Peoples, immigrants, and youth, who show comparatively strong interest in the sector.

The Issue

Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector has been grappling with significant labour shortages that threaten its sustainability and growth. These shortages contributed to an estimated \$6.6 billion in lost sales in 2022 alone. This sector, which plays a crucial role in feeding the nation and contributing to the economy, has faced persistent challenges in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. Ongoing labour shortages have been exacerbated in recent years due to factors such as demographic shifts, rural depopulation, and evolving job expectations influenced by broader economic and social trends. Labour shortages are impacting the operational capabilities of farms and food processing facilities, and pose risks to food security and the economic stability of rural communities across Canada.

Historically, the agriculture and agri-food sector has relied heavily on domestic and temporary foreign workers to meet its labour demands. However, the sector has struggled with high turnover rates – particularly among entry-level positions – and with filling skilled positions. These challenges are compounded by the seasonal nature of the work and the often-remote locations of agricultural operations, which limit the pool of job seekers. Additionally, there is competition with other sectors, which makes it harder to attract young and new workers.

To address these labour shortages, initiatives such as improving recruitment and retention, enhancing workplace conditions and increasing the appeal of agriculture and agri-food jobs have been attempted. These initiatives have had varying degrees of success, underscoring the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to workforce development in the sector.



What We Investigated

The project was guided by several research questions to address the challenges and opportunities within the Canadian agri-food sector, particularly on workforce dynamics in primary agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing. The primary questions explored were:

- What motivates individuals to work in this sector?
- What attracts individuals to specific workplaces or companies?
- What potential improvements could employers make to enhance workplace culture and employee retention?

Key stakeholders included the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC), which led the project, and industry partners such as Food Processing Skills Canada, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, and Food and Beverage Canada.

The research drew on multiple methods across four streams. On the employer side, researchers conducted 13 interviews, focus groups with 30 participants, and a survey with 235 responses, gathering both narrative data on HR practices and statistical insights into employee turnover. On the worker side, more than 2,000 Canadians aged 18–65 outside the sector were surveyed about their perceptions of agricultural careers, with equity, diversity and inclusion foregrounded throughout. Two additional studies, both conducted by Smart Prosperity Institute, examined the structural conditions shaping workforce capacity: a technology adoption readiness study that developed an evaluation framework for SMEs across dimensions such as strategic planning, digital skills, and cybersecurity; and a rural infrastructure study that used literature review and a province-by-province ecosystem scan to assess gaps in transportation, housing, broadband, utilities, and social services and their effects on worker attraction and retention.

Through a second phase of funding, these research findings were promoted through *Driving Insights*, a knowledge mobilization initiative targeting employers, post-secondary institutions, government, industry associations, immigrant-serving agencies, and training providers across Canada. Activities included:

- a national NWSP Summit
- five webinars
- four myth-busting events designed to engage job seekers unfamiliar with the sector
- four e-magazines
- broader outreach through social media, podcasts, speaking engagements, and media interviews.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture and Food and Beverage Canada were partners for this phase.

What We're Learning

Turnover and recruitment challenges point to a persistent expectation gap

A key finding from industry stakeholders confirmed that employers experienced high turnover rates: 58% of respondents reported being “concerned” or “very concerned” about employee turnover. Companies that hire Canadian employees have a 50% retention rate after their first month, with a 25% average turnover rate beyond that point. Employers attributed this turnover primarily to unmet employee expectations on working conditions and competitive pay from other sectors. The difficulty in recruiting both skilled and entry-level domestic employees compounds the problem, with 67% of employers reporting significant challenges. These findings point to a sector that has yet to close the gap between what workers expect and what the work delivers.

Successful employers are intentional about workplace culture

Employers who have attracted and retained workers have made intentional investments in workplace culture, rather than leaving retention to chance. Activities include extensive onboarding processes and regular employee check-ins, particularly within the first month of work, the period when turnover is highest. Employers who actively listened to their staff and made adjustments based on their input were more successful in building positive workplace cultures. Community engagement, which strengthens an employer’s appeal to both prospective and current employees, represents another underleveraged opportunity: only 10% of operations are actively invested in community partnerships.

Workers lack interest in and knowledge of the sector

Workers' impressions of the sector were positive (76% very/somewhat positive), yet interest in learning more about career opportunities was relatively low. Over half of survey respondents (54%) were unable to identify a job in the agricultural sector besides "farmer." This is concerning, as it points to a general lack of awareness of higher-skilled professions that offer competitive pay and benefits. Nearly all Canadians rate financial security (94%) and work-life balance (92%) as important career goals, yet there is an overarching belief that careers in agriculture do not deliver on either front. However, Indigenous Peoples and immigrants, particularly newcomers, showed greater interest in agriculture careers and were more willing to consider career changes and relocation for better opportunities. This finding points to equity-deserving groups as an important and underleveraged talent pool for the sector.

Myth-busting events expand career awareness beyond traditional networks

Piloted for the first time by CAHRC, four myth-busting events were hosted to engage job seekers who had not previously considered careers in agriculture or food and beverage manufacturing. The events confirmed that workforce growth will depend on recruiting beyond traditional agriculture settings. They also showed that awareness of the full range of careers across the food value chain remains limited. Key priorities that emerged include aligning skills development with the sector's digital and technological modernization, expanding work-integrated learning, and strengthening youth pathways and succession support. Given the relationship-driven nature of the sector, connecting job seekers to mentors, sector events, and professional networks is essential to converting interest into entry. This format was in high demand, and CAHRC is actively pursuing opportunities to continue and expand the myth-busting model.

Structural barriers limit the sector's capacity to modernize and attract workers

Smart Prosperity Institute found that advanced and emerging technology adoption remains below the Canadian average. Only 7.7% of food manufacturers use emerging technologies, compared to 17.3% across industries. Key barriers include high capital and maintenance costs, labour shortages, uncertain returns on investment, and limited rural broadband access, which restricts the use of cloud-based tools.

★ Why It Matters

The findings from this project underscore the need for a coordinated workforce strategy to address labour shortages and enhance retention in Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector, with lessons that extend beyond it. Many sectors struggle to attract and retain skilled talent, dampening firm-level prospects and limiting broader economic growth, particularly for equity-deserving groups already disadvantaged in the labour market. Policies that encourage organizational investment in employee well-being, inclusive practices, and community engagement could help improve job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. The agriculture sector's experience offers a compelling case study for others navigating the same challenges.



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But improving conditions inside the sector is only part of the challenge. Outdated perceptions of agricultural work are holding back job seekers who could be strong candidates because they are unaware that the sector offers specialized, high-paying roles with real career progression. With the right skills interventions, many of these opportunities could lead to fulfilling, stable careers. Efforts are needed to dispel myths and build awareness, particularly by promoting higher-skilled opportunities that showcase the full range of career pathways the sector offers.

Green-related skills and knowledge are growing in significance and are becoming widespread across many sectors and occupations, requiring more workers to upskill by building upon their existing competencies.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

The myth-busting events offered direct evidence of this potential: with accurate information and direct exposure, job seekers who had never considered agriculture left with genuine interest. Demystifying the sector is a workforce development strategy in its own right.

► What's Next

The [workforce strategic plan](#) resulting from this project provides directions for addressing workforce challenges in the sector. It articulates clear areas of action and identifies roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders to improve transparency and accountability. The strategy also provides tools and resources to support the implementation of the strategy. CAHRC is implementing the strategy with partners. Focus areas include: immigration and foreign workers; people and workplace culture; skill development; automation and technology; and perception and awareness of the sector's industries and careers.

A five-year funding agreement with Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) will sustain this momentum, supporting an annual NWSP Summit and the continued convening of NWSP Working Groups. CAHRC will also pursue additional funding to support research and tool creation aligned with priorities from the NWSP process.

The myth-busting event format was well received by stakeholders and participants in the regions where it was tested. CAHRC is actively working to expand the model to additional regions to build career awareness among job seekers who have not previously considered the sector.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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