

Keeping food supply chain open is vital, councillor says

By Mark Pavilons

Keeping the food supply chain strong, and supporting farmers is vital during these uncertain times. With closures and border restrictions due to the COVID-19 virus, protecting our food sources remains a priority. Councillor Avia Eek, a Holland Marsh farmer, is closely monitoring the situation. She noted the federal government has made the decision to lift the ban on travel for temporary foreign workers, those farmers like Eek hire through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program. This program has existed since the 1960s, and is facilitated and coordinated through the Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services. Growing fruits and vegetables for our country, and for export markets (economic development) is a labour intensive task. While farmers use technology to reduce the impact of agriculture on the environment, and to make some jobs easier, there are simply some jobs on the farm that require hands-on labour, and we count on labour from source countries like Trinidad/Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica, Mexico, and the Eastern Caribbean to provide workers to help us grow food to put on consumers' tables, Eek said. Without these workers, Canadians simply would not enjoy the fresh, local variety of fruits and vegetables that they currently enjoy. We would have to rely on trading partners to ship their products to us (and not all countries follow the same best farm practices, rules and regulations we must adhere to here in Canada). For more information about the importance of these workers, go to www.hortcouncil.ca. Eek is sympathetic for the dilemma faced by the federal government. She is also keenly aware of the importance of farmers getting their workers here to start this year's growing season. It's time to get this year's fruit and vegetable growing season started. I know many farmers are getting anxious, wondering if they're going to get their workers on time, and these are concerns that have merit. Growing healthy, safe, nutritious food is ALL about timing. I feel for those farmers who are uncertain whether they can start this growing season, whether they will have to scale down their operation, or not be able to farm at all due to no workforce. Eek Farms employs three workers, who are scheduled to arrive from Trinidad/Tobago at the end of April. As of now, they are still coming, then after their 14-day quarantine, they will be transplanting the 10 acres of onions that are currently being grown for Eek in Beamsville. For more information about the announcement exempting the TFWs from the travel ban, go to <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2020/03/canada-provides-update-on-exemptions-to-travel-restrictions-to-protect-canadians-and-support-the-economy.html>. Everyone involved in this crisis is working hard to make sure all our concerns are being dealt with, and I thank them for that, this is not an easy time for any of us. We have to continue to collaborate, share ideas, and remember we're all in this together. Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, announced important new measures March 23, to support farmers and agri-food businesses in Canada facing financial hardship due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Farm Credit Canada will receive support from the Government of Canada that will allow for an additional \$5 billion in lending capacity to producers, agribusinesses, and food processors. This will offer increased flexibility to farmers who face cashflow issues and to processors who are impacted by lost sales, helping them remain financially strong during this difficult time. In addition, all eligible farmers who have an outstanding Advance Payments Program (APP) loan due on or before April 30 will receive a Stay of Default, allowing them an additional six months to repay the loan. This important measure, which represents \$173 million in deferred loans, will help keep more money in farmers' pockets during these critical months. The Stay of Default will also provide farmers the flexibility they need to manage their cashflow when facing lower prices or reduced marketing opportunities. Applicable farmers who still have interest-free loans outstanding will have the opportunity to apply for an additional \$100,000 interest-free portion for 2020-2021, as long as their total APP advances remain under the \$1 million cap. The Government of Canada remains committed to supporting Canada's agricultural sector to ensure that farmers and businesses have the support they need to provide for their families and all Canadians during this critical time. Farmers and food producers work hard to put food on tables across our country, and they should not have to worry about being able to afford their loan payments or having enough money to support their own families. We are taking action now to give them more flexibility to meet the challenges ahead in these times of uncertainty, the prime minister said.