

Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program eyed as a model around the world

By Mark Pavilons

The world's most successful program connecting seasonal workers with agricultural employers has kicked into high gear.

It continues to draw praise from area farmers and organizations and in fact, is recognized around the world.

Administered by Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services (F.A.R.M.S.), the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) links some 14,000 requests for seasonal workers with jobs at Ontario farms during the growing season.

Not only does the 48-year-old program provide a long list of benefits to the workers and the farmers, but also it creates two Canadian jobs in the agrifood industry for every worker employed through SAWP at Ontario agricultural operations, according to FARMS president Ken Forth.

“Governments and agricultural organizations around the world are looking at this program as a model,” Forth said. “For decades, this program has provided Ontario farmers a steady source of reliable labour as a supplement to local labour. At the same time it gives the seasonal workers well-paying employment, benefits and educational opportunities not available at home.”

According to Jamie Reaume, former president of the Holland Marsh Growers' Association, the F.A.R.M.S. program is Canada's greatest foreign aid program, one that sees economic improvements for the workers coming to this area, while having them return to their own nations not just with money in their pockets (the average hourly wage is about five to seven times what they would make in their own countries) but with technologies that lead to enhanced lifestyles for those involved in the program.

This area is one of the largest growing regions, along with Niagara, Leamington, and Norfolk, for its use of the seasonal worker program. As such, we have a vast array of knowledge built around their expertise. And it is this expertise that is relied upon.

“Many of the workers spend years on the same farming operation, building a ‘family’ rapport with the farmers. Wedding invitations, children, and other family-oriented events take precedent for these relationships. In fact, the average farm worker has been with the same farmer, in this area, for more than 13 years – a factor in many of the business decisions that these farmers are making,”

Reaume said.

He stressed that these workers are “key to ensuring Ontarians and Canadians have access to fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables, and to those who eat the product of the Holland Marsh beyond our borders.

“These individuals are instrumental in moving this area's \$170-million farmgate sector (and more than a billion dollars provincially) through all of its variable marketing channels. They are an integral part of Ontario's main economic engine (farming and food), without whom our system would likely collapse. But more so, they are vitally important to the countries that they arrive from, because they give back what they earn here to enhance their own family's wealth, raising their status, in many cases, towards middle and upper income levels.”

Reaume added that many of those who come to Canada utilize the knowledge gained here to make improvements to their own farming communities, ensuring that the trend towards self-sufficiency of food supply continues.

“It is a remarkable program, filled with remarkable folks from both sides of the border, and one that is clearly the envy of the world,” he said. “While the area, and the Holland Marsh Growers' Association favours local labour, and would love to see our fellow citizens putting forth the same efforts as our colleagues from the seasonal agricultural workers program, our time-filled occupation is not seeing a lot of movement towards farmer employees. Sadly, farming is not the easiest of life choices, but it is one that requires hard work, dedication, and a relentless drive that eludes many within our society today.”

Canada's finest foreign aid program is seen in use every day in the fields in and around the Holland Marsh and that “should be cause for celebration at the diversity that continues to grow in your own backyard.”

Seasonal workers benefit from signed contracts that guarantee them all the protections and benefits Canadian workers receive.

They receive an hourly wage rate set by Human Resources & Skills Development Canada. The hourly rate is not less than the provincial minimum wage rate or the local prevailing rate paid to Canadians doing the same job, whichever is greatest.

“Ontario farmers pay the highest farm worker wages in North America and face intense competition from low-wage competitors,”

Forth added. “Without this program, many Ontario farmers simply couldn't continue to grow fruits and vegetables. They'd stop growing altogether or move into less labour-intensive crops.”

King's Eek Farms has been part of F.A.R.M.S. (Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services) since 1998.

This program provides a necessary service to our agricultural community. It not provides an opportunity for a better life for the workers who comes here, but it also boosts our local economies, according to farmer and councillor Avia Eek. These workers spent a lot of money locally on items they send back home (tools, electronics, clothes, even washing machines).

Their farm is always struggling to find dependable workers and this program makes the connection between that needed work force

and farms on which to work.

Eek said the two men they hire through SAWP have been with us for almost a decade now and they are among the more than 1,500+ workers who spend six to eight months helping grow the vegetables that feed York Region, the GTA and others in our province, country, and some of our international trading partners.

?I consider this program as part of a foreign aid program, to the extent that the people who come to work here, on our farms, are able to afford to build a better life for themselves and their families in their home countries.?This program affords them the opportunity to pay for an education for their children, many learn new skills while working on our farms (skills they can use back home), and even though they are paid minimum wage (\$11 per hour)?for the work they do here, once you factor in the exchange rate of their own countries, it works out to them making the equivalent of 6-7 times their own money.

?I believe many of our international trading partners would enjoy having access to a program such as this, if only, for the reliable workforce.

?We, as farmers, would not be able to do what we do to feed people, without this very unique, specialized program. To many of the workers, Canada is considered their second home!?

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