

The recent debate surrounding temporary foreign workers has understandably focused on the abuses of the program and the displacement of Canadian workers. Yet, there is an untold story about the invaluable role that foreign workers play in maintaining Canadian jobs and safeguarding our agri-food industry.

Canada's meat processing and livestock sectors are in desperate need of new workers, and have therefore put in place aggressive recruitment strategies targeting Canadians in every region of the country including various First Nations communities. They also actively recruit among young people and new citizens.

More specifically, our companies participate in job fairs; advertise in local, regional and national publications; work with placement agencies and headhunting firms; provide summer internship and co-op programs with area schools; and use fly-in teams to travel into communities across the country.

Despite our best efforts, however, many employers in our sector have been unable to recruit or retain a sufficient number of workers to allow us to either operate at full capacity or increase capacity to maximize new export market opportunities or diversify our businesses into new value-added products.

Due to the nature of the livestock and meat processing sectors, the majority of our operations are based in rural communities. Moreover, the work itself is physically demanding – butchering animals or processing meat in either refrigerated or hot and humid conditions – and can be challenging to some.

As a result of this acute shortage of Canadian workers, the meat processing and livestock sectors have relied on temporary foreign workers to help supplement and sustain our Canadian workforce. To be clear, these foreign workers do not displace Canadians workers, they help ensure they have jobs.

In a recent House of Commons debate, Employment Minister Jason Kenney correctly noted that without access to temporary foreign

workers some companies in our sector “would have to radically reduce their operations, lay Canadians off, and, in some places, shut their doors.”

In some cases dozens, if not hundreds, of workers can sit idle if processors do not have enough manpower on the line to support a full shift. At any given time, the work of five or six employees can be entirely dependent on the shift having a single worker with the specialized skills and training needed to complete the job.

Because of the current labour shortage in many communities, some processors are already running below full capacity and are being forced to cut back shifts when they want to increase them. If Canada were to lose any more domestic processing capacity, the impact on our agriculture sector would be swift and severe.

Without sufficient domestic processing capacity, Canadian livestock producers would be forced to send more of their hogs and cattle to the United States. When livestock is processed outside of Canada, it has a direct impact on the sustainability, security and sovereignty of our entire food supply.

Moreover, if Canadian cattle and hog producers are forced by insufficient domestic capacity to rely on U.S. companies to process their livestock, they will be at an even greater risk if borders close, as we have seen all too often in the recent past. A border closure would have the potential to decimate them.

While we recognize and respect that the government must take decisive action to prevent further, future abuses of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, any such changes must strike a balance between salvaging it and savaging it. Put another way: We must amend the program, not end the program.

Different sectors, with different needs, may require different solutions. For agriculture, the solution is clear: The government should strengthen and extend the agriculture stream of the program to include meat processors and to set out a clearer path to permanent residency for foreign workers who are qualified to stay.

Canada's meat processors and livestock producers are fully integrated and mutually dependent. We both need a consistent access to a stable workforce. Our strong preference is to hire Canadians. If that is not possible, our second choice is to hire foreign workers who want to become Canadians.

To those who worry that greater access to foreign workers would mean a lessening of our efforts to recruit Canadians, we make this commitment: If you need of a job and want to work in our sector, contact us at [info@cmc-cvc.com](mailto:info@cmc-cvc.com) and we promise to connect you with a company looking to hire.



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