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Foreign workers in the Canadian agriculture industry

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Abstract

This study documents annual trends in employment and earnings of foreign workers employed in agriculture and various subsectors of agriculture, as well as the characteristics of foreign workers in this industry. It also examines transitions to permanent residence for those who entered Canada as foreign workers and worked in agriculture. The main objective of the analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of the use of foreign worker programs in agriculture in Canada.

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Introduction

Foreign workers are a growing segment of the Canadian labour force. Approximately 613,200 foreign nationals in Canada held work permits in 2016 (Lu and Hou 2019)—more than twice the number of foreign workers a decade earlier (294,300 in 2005). Since the mid-1960s, agriculture has been one of the main recipients of foreign workers in Canada, and several programs are available to agriculture firms looking to fill their employment shortages by hiring foreign workers (Preibisch 2010; Meyer-Robinson and Burt 2016).

The Canadian agriculture and agri-food system employed 2.3 million people in 2016 and accounted for 6.7% of Canada's gross domestic product (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2020). That same year, Canada was the fifth-largest exporter of agriculture and agri-food products in the world, following the European Union, the United States, Brazil and China. However, despite the importance of agriculture, there are persistent reports that employers in the industry are having trouble finding Canadians to fill their labour needs, which explains their tendency to seek labour outside of Canada (Meyer-Robinson and Burt 2016).

The causes of these shortages are complex and varied. First, the agriculture sector experiences far larger seasonal fluctuations in employment than other industries. During the high season, the industry employs 30%—or approximately 100,000—more workers than during the low season. Seasonal fluctuations in the demand for workers are even larger in crop production, where relatively short periods of high demand for workers are followed by prolonged periods of low demand. Second, agriculture is generally perceived as a sector that is physically demanding and imposes long work hours. Although mechanization is often proposed as a solution to this problem, many agricultural processes are difficult to mechanize. Third, the average wage in agriculture is relatively low, and fewer domestic workers are willing to work in agriculture now than before, despite the fact that the wage gap between agriculture and other industries narrowed from 33% in 2000 to 25% in 2016 (Meyer-Robinson and Burt 2016). Lastly, the aging population in rural areas and the remoteness of agriculture work from urban centres also contribute to the employment shortages that lead agriculture employers to recruit and hire foreign workers.

The main objective of this analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of the use of foreign worker programs in agriculture in Canada. The study examines annual trends in employment and the earnings of foreign workers in agriculture from 2005 to 2017—the latest year for which information on tax filing among foreign workers was available. The results are presented for agriculture and the various subsectors it encompasses. This study also examines characteristics of foreign workers in agriculture. The longitudinal aspect of the data makes it possible to examine transitions to permanent residence for those who entered Canada as foreign workers and worked in agriculture.

Temporary foreign worker programs in Canada: A brief overview

Foreign nationals can be authorized to work in Canada under two major programs: the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), which is to be used as a "last resort for employers to fill jobs for which qualified Canadians are not available," and the International Mobility Program (IMP), which serves "to advance Canada's broad economic and cultural national interest" (Employment and Social Development Canada 2019). The key difference between these programs is the employer requirement of a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), which verifies that the need for the foreign workers is justified and there are no Canadians or permanent residents available for the job. To hire foreign workers under the TFWP, employers must first obtain a positive or neutral LMIA from Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Work permits issued through the TFWP are employer specific. Under the IMP, employers are not required to seek an LMIA before issuing an offer of employment, and the work permits issued under it can range from being restrictive to flexible—some are employer specific, while others are open to any employer.

In addition, some foreign nationals may be authorized to work in Canada without a work permit. This category includes business visitors, foreign representatives and government officials, military personnel, performing artists, athletes, reporters, clergy, and health care students. Since June 1, 2014, international students have been allowed to work off campus without a work permit in specific circumstances.

Substreams designed specifically for the agriculture industry

Currently, employers in agriculture can hire foreign workers under four substreams of the TFWP: the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), the agricultural stream, the stream for high-wage positions and the stream for low-wage positions (Employment and Social Development Canada 2020). The SAWP and agricultural steams were designed specifically for the industry. Employers must meet two criteria: (1) production must be in specific commodities and (2) the activity must be related to on-farm primary agriculture. The main difference between the two is that the SAWP is available only to citizens from Mexico or participating Caribbean countries that have signed bilateral memorandums of understanding with Canada. The program provides prenegotiated worker agreements (contracts) that include specific requirements around the length of time that can be worked in the year and the hours of work.

Under the SAWP, an employer cannot hire foreign workers for a period exceeding eight months within a calendar year. With mutual agreement and prior written approvals from the foreign government representative in Canada and ESDC and Service Canada, SAWP permit holders can transfer between different SAWP-qualified employers while the work permit is valid. For the agricultural stream, the work permit can be issued for up to two years, but foreign workers hired under this stream can only work for the employer named on the work permit (Employment and Social Development Canada 2020).

Agriculture employers whose production is not on the National Commodities List can only hire agricultural foreign workers through the other “non-agricultural” streams under the TFWP: the stream for high-wage positions and the stream for low-wage positions.

Transition to permanent resident status

Foreign workers can immigrate through federal or provincial programs as long as they meet the applicable eligibility criteria. The opportunity for temporary residents to become permanent residents and ultimately Canadian citizens is deemed to be a powerful draw factor for prospective workers. Transition pathways to permanent resident status are also front and centre in the public debate over foreign workers in low-skilled or low-wage occupations in Canada and—more specifically—in industries that rely increasingly on foreign workers to address long-term labour shortages. Therefore, this study will look at the transition rates of foreign workers in agriculture to help identify trends.

Data

The main data source used for this study was the Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database (CEEDD). The CEEDD is a linkage environment that contains information from multiple administrative files that can be linked to each other through unique individual and business identifiers. Among its main components are T4 files (Statement of Remuneration Paid) issued to all employees by their employers at the end of each calendar year and also submitted to the Canada Revenue Agency. The T4 files contain information on firm-specific individual annual earnings, employment insurance payments, union dues and pension adjustments. More importantly, T4 files serve as a key link between employers (enterprises) and their employees, as they contain both business identifiers and the individual identifiers of the workers these firms employed in any year during the analysis period (2005 to 2017).

One of the advantages of the T4 files is the availability of the enterprise's four-digit North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code. NAICS codes allow for a subsector analysis within each broadly defined industry. Because the focus of the study is on agriculture (i.e., one component of agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting: two-digit NAICS code 11), the agriculture subsectors included in the analysis were crop production (111), animal production and aquaculture (112), and support activities for crop and animal production (1151 and 1152). Other subsectors below NAICS code 11, such as forestry, logging, fishing, hunting and trapping (113 and 114), as well as support activities for forestry (1153), were excluded from the analysis.

Another CEEDD component is the temporary residents files—a subset of the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), which contains essential information on non-permanent Canadian residents, such as their basic demographic characteristics (e.g., age and sex), country of origin and document type (e.g., refugee claimant, study permit, work permit, etc.). The temporary residents files cover all permits (excluding visitor visas) issued from 1980 to 2018. Through unique individual identifiers, temporary residents can be linked to T4 files to identify foreign workers and establish their work and earnings histories in Canada.

Unique identifiers in CEEDD allow for individuals to be followed over time, which makes it possible to analyze changes in foreign workers' immigration status, earnings, industry and location. For the purpose of this study, the term "foreign worker" refers to temporary residents[1] working in Canada and receiving a T4 from a firm in the agriculture industry.[2] Permanent residents are not considered foreign workers.

Analysis

The first step in the analysis is to document recent trends in the annual numbers and distribution of foreign workers in the agriculture industry. Table 1 compares the distribution of all workers and foreign workers across three subsectors: crop production, animal production and aquaculture, and the subsector that combines support activities for crop and animal productions. Crop production is the largest agriculture subsector and the share of employment in this subsector grew from 55.4% in 2005 to 62.6% in 2017. In comparison, the share of employment in animal production and aquaculture declined from 35.8% to 28.2% over the same period. Despite different trends, these two subsectors combined accounted for similar shares of employment in agriculture—91.2% in 2005 and 90.8% in 2017.

The vast majority of foreign workers were employed in crop production, which accounted for 88.1% of all foreign workers in agriculture in 2005 and 88.2% in 2017 (Table 1). The share of foreign workers employed in crop production declined during the recession in 2008 and 2009, but increased in subsequent years.

1. Temporary residents include work permit holders, study permit holders, refugee claimants and permit holders of any other types except visitor visas.
2. If a worker had multiple T4 records, any record showing employment in the agriculture industry was used. Therefore, this study included workers whose main job (i.e., the one with the highest earnings) was in agriculture, as well as those whose main job was not in agriculture but who had other jobs in this industry.

Table 1
Distribution of workers, by agriculture industry subgroup

	All workers				Foreign workers			
	Agriculture	Crop production	Animal production and aquaculture	Support activities for crop and animal production	Agriculture	Crop production	Animal production and aquaculture	Support activities for crop and animal production
					percent			
2005	100.0	55.4	35.8	8.8	100.0	88.1	10.1	1.8
2006	100.0	55.2	36.1	8.7	100.0	87.8	10.0	2.2
2007	100.0	55.0	36.6	8.4	100.0	86.1	11.3	2.5
2008	100.0	55.5	36.3	8.2	100.0	84.8	12.1	3.1
2009	100.0	56.1	35.7	8.2	100.0	82.9	13.0	4.1
2010	100.0	57.2	34.5	8.3	100.0	83.5	12.8	3.7
2011	100.0	56.3	35.1	8.6	100.0	84.1	12.5	3.4
2012	100.0	61.3	31.3	7.4	100.0	87.0	10.4	2.6
2013	100.0	62.1	30.2	7.7	100.0	86.8	10.3	2.9
2014	100.0	61.3	29.8	8.9	100.0	86.7	10.0	3.4
2015	100.0	61.5	29.3	9.2	100.0	87.8	8.5	3.8
2016	100.0	61.8	28.9	9.3	100.0	88.1	7.7	4.2
2017	100.0	62.6	28.2	9.2	100.0	88.2	7.6	4.3

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database.

One in five workers employed in crop production in 2017 was a foreign worker

Table 2 shows the prevalence of foreign workers in agriculture and the three subsectors. There was a steady increase in the share of foreign workers employed in agriculture from 2005 to 2017. Compared with 2005 (6.2%), the share of foreign workers in agriculture more than doubled by 2014 (13.2%), and increased further to 16.1% in 2017. The number of foreign workers employed in agriculture increased from 17,200 in 2005 to 50,800 in 2017.

The rates of growth in the share of foreign workers in the two major subsectors were similar to the overall growth rate in the share of foreign workers in agriculture (Table 2). In crop production, the share of foreign workers increased from 9.9% to 22.7%, and in animal production and aquaculture, the share of foreign workers increased from 1.8% to 4.4%. However, the rate of increase in the share of foreign workers was the fastest in the support activities subsector, increasing more than fivefold—from 1.3% in 2005 to 7.5% in 2017. The total number of foreign workers employed in support activities reached 2,200 in 2017, which was still well below the 44,800 and 3,900 working in crop production and animal production and aquaculture, respectively.

Table 2
Counts and shares of foreign workers among all workers in agriculture

	All industry		Agriculture		Crop production		Animal production and aquaculture		Support activities for crop and animal production	
	count	share percent	count	share percent	count	share percent	count	share percent	count	share percent
2005	180,600	1.1	17,200	6.2	15,200	9.9	1,700	1.8	300	1.3
2006	201,900	1.2	19,300	7.0	16,900	11.2	1,900	1.9	400	1.8
2007	240,900	1.4	21,600	8.0	18,600	12.5	2,400	2.5	500	2.4
2008	289,500	1.6	25,200	9.3	21,400	14.1	3,000	3.1	800	3.5
2009	313,000	1.8	27,100	9.9	22,400	14.7	3,500	3.6	1,100	5.0
2010	327,700	1.9	28,900	10.1	24,100	14.7	3,700	3.8	1,100	4.5
2011	343,900	1.9	31,200	10.9	26,200	16.2	3,900	3.9	1,100	4.3
2012	378,700	2.1	33,800	11.4	29,400	16.2	3,500	3.8	900	4.0
2013	412,100	2.3	36,700	12.0	31,900	16.8	3,800	4.1	1,100	4.6
2014	439,200	2.4	39,300	13.2	34,000	18.6	3,900	4.4	1,300	5.0
2015	450,000	2.4	41,400	13.6	36,300	19.4	3,500	3.9	1,600	5.6
2016	479,900	2.6	46,100	15.0	40,600	21.3	3,600	4.0	1,900	6.8
2017	547,400	2.9	50,800	16.1	44,800	22.7	3,900	4.4	2,200	7.5

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database.

The earnings share of foreign workers in agriculture in 2017 was smaller than their employment share[3]

Although the employment share of foreign workers in agriculture was 16.1% in 2017 (Table 2), their earnings share was only 14% (Table 3). The difference in their employment and earnings likely results from the combination of fewer months of work and lower wages among temporary foreign workers relative to Canadian-born workers. Although the earnings share for foreign workers in agriculture was smaller than the employment share, the relative gap was considerably smaller than that between the earnings (1.6%) and employment (2.9%) shares of all foreign workers in Canada.

The total earnings of foreign workers in agriculture grew from $232.6 million in 2005 to $911.3 million in 2017. Foreign workers in crop production in 2017 earned $783.2 million, or 85.9% of all foreign worker earnings in agriculture. This share was slightly lower than that of foreign workers in crop production (88.2%) (Table 2).

3. The T4 file does not contain information about time worked (i.e., weeks or hours an individual worked). Therefore, it was not possible to derive weekly or hourly earnings rates.

Table 3
Annual T4 earnings and shares of foreign workers among all workers in agriculture

	All industry		Agriculture		Crop production		Animal production and aquaculture		Support activities for crop and animal production	
	total earnings ($1000)	share percent	total earnings ($1000)	share percent	total earnings ($1000)	share percent	total earnings ($1000)	share percent	total earnings ($1000)	share percent
2005	6,217,811	0.8	232,637	5.0	200,933	9.1	26,928	1.3	4,776	1.1
2006	6,174,440	0.8	268,788	5.6	231,449	10.3	31,148	1.5	6,192	1.4
2007	7,519,422	0.9	318,449	6.7	267,616	11.7	41,681	2.0	9,153	2.1
2008	8,861,219	1.1	375,768	7.7	309,307	13.0	53,415	2.6	13,046	3.0
2009	9,656,687	1.2	436,418	8.5	347,753	13.7	72,472	3.4	16,193	3.4
2010	10,016,329	1.2	484,343	9.2	386,825	14.9	80,740	3.8	16,777	3.2
2011	10,661,811	1.3	516,713	9.7	415,508	15.8	84,808	3.9	16,396	3.2
2012	12,115,067	1.4	572,581	10.1	480,751	15.6	76,078	3.6	15,752	3.4
2013	13,748,378	1.6	639,871	10.9	530,666	16.3	88,158	4.2	21,046	4.1
2014	14,363,364	1.6	696,325	11.9	575,838	18.1	95,851	4.7	24,636	4.2
2015	14,090,719	1.5	733,468	12.1	621,799	18.5	84,555	4.0	27,115	4.4
2016	13,981,961	1.6	828,989	13.3	713,751	20.5	81,084	3.9	34,154	5.1
2017	14,713,654	1.6	911,313	14.0	783,206	21.1	87,961	4.2	40,146	5.7

Note: All dollar amounts are presented in 2017 constant dollars.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database.

More than 90% of foreign workers in agriculture had a work permit under TFWP and were in a low-skilled position

Next, the study examines the individual characteristics of foreign workers in the agriculture industry (Table 4). The vast majority of foreign workers in agriculture had a TFWP permit, and the share of foreign workers in this category was similar in 2005 (92.4%) and 2017 (93.2%). The shares were even higher in crop production (95.0% in 2005 and 95.1% in 2017). Notably, the share of foreign workers in agriculture without a work permit grew to 0.99% of all foreign workers in agriculture in 2017 and to 10% in the support activities for crop and animal production subsector.

Only 5.2% of foreign workers in agriculture were women in 2005 and 7.6% in 2017. However, the share of women was higher in support activities (17.9% in 2017) (Table 4).

The share of foreign workers in low-skilled[4] positions in agriculture remained almost unchanged from 2005 to 2017 at more than 90%.

While almost two-thirds (65.3%) of all foreign workers in agriculture worked in firms with 20 employees or fewer in 2005, the corresponding share in 2017 was 41.2%. A notable shift has also occurred in the geographic distribution of foreign workers in agriculture (Table 4). In 2005, 72.0% of all foreign workers in agriculture were employed in Ontario. However, in 2017, only 46.1% were. The drop was especially pronounced in animal production and aquaculture. Of all foreign nationals working in this subsector, the share of those working in Ontario declined from 52.8% in 2005 to 17.2% in 2017. The share of foreign workers in other provinces increased, especially in British Columbia where the share of foreign workers grew from 4.6% in 2005 to 17.1% in 2017.

4. In the context of Canadian immigration programs, low-skilled work describes work that is classified as being at either Skill level C or Skill level D of the National Occupational Classification (NOC), and high-skilled work describes work that is classified as Skill level 0 (zero), Skill level A or Skill level B. The NOC is Canada's national system for describing occupations. Under this system, Skill level 0 includes management jobs, Skill level A includes professional jobs that usually require a university degree, Skill level B includes technical jobs and skilled trades that usually require a college diploma or training as an apprentice, Skill level C includes intermediate jobs that usually require a high school diploma and/or job-specific training, and Skill level D includes labour-intensive jobs that usually involve on-the-job training.

Table 4
Characteristics of foreign workers in agriculture, 2005 and 2017

	Agriculture		Crop production		Animal production and aquaculture		Support activities for crop/animal production	
	2005	2017	2005	2017	2005	2017	2005	2017
	percent							
All	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Age								
0 to 24	5.6	8.3	4.3	7.0	15.0	15.5	x	22.5
25 to 34	36.0	34.3	35.6	33.1	37.8	43.7	46.6	41.6
35 to 44	39.6	35.0	40.6	36.1	33.7	29.0	x	24.1
45 and older	18.8	22.4	19.5	23.9	13.5	11.8	x	11.9
Share of women	5.2	7.6	4.2	6.8	10.1	10.9	x	17.9
Permit type								
Work permit–TFWP	92.4	93.2	95.0	95.1	76.0	81.0	56.3	74.4
Work permit–IMP	7.3	5.8	4.8	4.3	23.4	18.2	41.1	15.6
Study, refugee or other permit holder without a work permit	x	1.0	x	0.6	x	x	x	10.0
Skill level on work permit								
High skill	2.3	2.5	x	1.2	14.5	17.7	x	x
Low skill	92.1	91.9	95.2	94.8	72.9	69.8	45.0	73.1
Skill level unknown	5.3	4.6	3.9	3.5	12.1	11.7	34.6	13.8
No work permit	x	1.0	x	0.6	x	x	x	10.0
Firm size								
1 to 20	65.3	41.2	63.5	39.1	80.8	78.3	66.3	19.9
21 to 100	30.7	40.6	32.5	42.5	15.0	15.5	x	45.4
Over 100	4.0	18.2	4.0	18.4	x	6.2	x	34.7
Province								
Atlantic provinces	1.2	3.9	1.1	3.8	x	4.9	x	x
Quebec	16.0	24.1	15.9	23.3	16.5	30.5	x	29.8
Ontario	72.0	46.1	75.0	49.5	52.8	17.2	34.3	28.3
Prairie provinces	6.1	8.4	4.0	5.6	23.6	38.9	x	12.4
British Columbia	4.6	17.1	4.0	17.4	x	8.2	x	26.1
Territories/unknown	x	0.3	x	0.3	x	x	x	x
Average earnings (2017 constant dollars)	13,500	17,900	13,200	17,500	15,500	22,800	15,500	18,600
Relative average earnings (%)	79.8	86.8	91.8	92.9	75.4	96.7	85.3	76.4

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Notes: All earnings are rounded to the nearest 100. TFWP stands for Temporary Foreign Worker Program and IMP stands for International Mobility Program.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database.

Foreign workers in animal production earned more on average than foreign workers in other agriculture subsectors in 2017

The results in Table 4 indicate that the average annual earnings of foreign workers in agriculture increased from $13,500 in 2005 to $17,900 in 2017. Foreign workers employed in animal production and aquaculture registered the highest average annual earnings in 2017 ($22,800), which is unsurprising, as this subsector also had the highest prevalence of foreign workers in high-skilled positions (17.7% versus just 1.2% in crop production).

Almost half of all foreign workers in agriculture come from Mexico

Table 5 shows that almost half of all foreign workers in agriculture in 2017 had arrived from Mexico (48.4%). The share of Mexican foreign workers in agriculture was slightly lower in 2017 (47.9%) than in 2005. The second-largest group of foreign workers in 2017 was from Jamaica (17.1%). However, the share of Jamaican foreign workers in 2017 was substantially lower than in 2005 (27.2%). Three of the five countries with the highest representation of foreign workers in agriculture were the same in 2017 as in 2005 (Mexico, Guatemala and Jamaica). The remaining two accounted for almost 9% in 2005 (Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados) and for 4.1% in 2017 (Thailand and the Philippines).

Table 5
Source country of foreign workers in agriculture, 2005 and 2017

	Agriculture	Crop production	Animal production and aquaculture	Support activities for crop and animal production
		percent		
2005				
Top five source countries that year				
Guatemala	1.6	1.6	x	x
Mexico	48.4	50.0	37.9	33.3
Barbados	1.8	1.9	x	x
Jamaica	27.2	29.1	14.9	x
Trinidad and Tobago	7.1	7.6	x	x
Other countries	13.9	9.8	41.6	57.0
2017				
Top five source countries that year				
Guatemala	17.0	15.6	26.2	29.3
Mexico	47.9	51.2	20.9	28.1
Jamaica	17.1	19.0	x	5.4
Philippines	2.2	1.2	11.7	5.2
Thailand	2.0	2.0	3.1	x
Other countries	13.9	11.2	35.8	31.8

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Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database.

About one-seventh of all foreign workers who entered Canada in 2013 obtained permanent resident status in the five years following their first entry

Table 6 shows the share of each entry cohort that made a transition to permanent resident status at some point since their first entry up to 2018, as well as the share of each cohort that made the transition in each of the first five years after their first entry to Canada. About 14% of the 2013 entry cohort made a transition to permanent resident status at some point in the five-year period from 2014 to 2018. The transition rate within the first five-year period increased gradually from 10.3% for the 2005 cohort to 16.5% for the 2012 cohort, then dropped slightly to 14% for the 2013 cohort.

Table 6
Transition to permanent resident status among foreign workers in agriculture

	Number of years since first entry to Canada with a temporary permit					
	First five years	1	2	3	4	5
			percent			
2005 entry cohort	10.3	0.9	2.2	3.0	2.6	1.6
2006 entry cohort	10.8	0.9	2.1	3.4	3.0	4.0
2007 entry cohort	12.4	1.2	2.1	3.7	2.7	2.8
2008 entry cohort	14.3	1.9	3.4	3.1	2.8	3.1
2009 entry cohort	15.6	1.6	2.6	3.2	3.8	4.4
2010 entry cohort	14.5	0.8	2.4	3.6	4.4	3.3
2011 entry cohort	14.8	1.1	2.9	3.5	3.9	3.4
2012 entry cohort	16.5	1.6	2.6	4.5	4.1	3.7
2013 entry cohort	14.0	0.6	2.2	3.9	3.4	3.8

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamic Database.

A companion study (Zhang, Ostrovsky and Arsenault 2020), showed that the incidence of transition to permanent resident status among foreign workers in agriculture was considerably lower than that among foreign workers in food production. For example, 41.7% of the 2013 entry cohort who worked in food production made a transition to permanent resident status between 2014 and 2018.[5]

Conclusion

Using CEEDD data linked to temporary resident files, this study examines the characteristics and contribution of foreign workers in agriculture. The study found that almost nine in ten foreign workers working in the agriculture industry were employed in crop production in 2017. In this sector, foreign workers accounted for 22.7% of all workers in 2017—up from 9.9% in 2005.

A typical foreign worker employed in agriculture in 2017 was male; in a low-skilled position; from Mexico, Jamaica or Guatemala; aged between 25 and 45; and hired under the TFWP. Of the three major agriculture subsectors (crop production, animal production and aquaculture, and support activities for crop and animal production), the support activities subsector registered the highest percentage of female foreign workers (17.9%).

This study observed a major shift in the geographic distribution of foreign workers between 2005 and 2017. There was a substantial decline in the share of foreign workers employed in Ontario (from 72.0% in 2005 to 46.1% in 2017) and a large increase in the shares of foreign workers employed in British Columbia (from 4.6% to 17.1%) and the Atlantic provinces (from 1.2% to 3.9%).

About one in seven (14%) foreign workers in agriculture who obtained their first permit in 2013 made a transition to permanent resident status in the five years from 2014 to 2018.

The prominent role of foreign workers in agriculture was further accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study indicated that the timing of the pandemic coincided with the period of highest demand for seasonal foreign workers in agriculture (Lu 2020). Because the agriculture sector is by far the largest employer of foreign workers, their availability is likely to be an important factor in the overall impact of the pandemic on the sector in 2020. In the long run, the effects of COVID-19 on the Canadian agriculture industry and associated foreign worker programs will depend on a variety of internal and external factors, including overall economic growth in Canada, public health concerns and the global spread of COVID-19.

5. For the 2005 cohort, the corresponding number was even higher—49.5% (Zhang, Ostrovsky and Arsenault 2020).

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