

Kawartha Lakes farmers struggling with temporary worker delays during pandemic

Sarah Sobanski

Kawartha Lakes farmer Jessica Foote is well into her first seeding and doesn't know when the rest of her workforce will be arriving.

"We're scraping together a mishmash of people to fill in for now," Foote says. "I've reached out to everybody I know and we'll get by."

Foote runs one of the five farms in the area that participate in the temporary foreign workers program, run through [Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services](#).

More than 40 workers between the farms were set to fly in for their busy seasons, but the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant delays. Only one farm has had its workers arrive; another is still expecting as many as 30.

"None of my workers got their work permits issued to them before the (Mexican) government shut down," Foote says. Her workers would usually arrive now, around the end of April, but she could be waiting until June at this point.

Kelly Maloney, economic officer of agriculture for Kawartha Lakes, says the hiring of foreign workers is something that started happening at farms in the area after the last few years. She says it goes back to farmers not being able to find workers to hire locally.

"With the delay, certainly there have been farms who've reached out to the out-of-work market," she says. "But those people will go back to work."

Between the snow, the delay and additional safety measures, such as the mandatory 14-day quarantine for workers if and when they arrive, these farmers are looking at a hard 2020 season.

Maloney points out these are full-time agriculture families — their produce is their primary source of income.

"Planting the crop is key," she says, adding that missing the first planting or those after it could be devastating to a local farm.

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Foote rifles off weedy fields and wasted food as just a few of the fallouts her farm could face if she doesn't get enough help.

Some of Foote's migrant workers have been with her farm for three seasons. She describes them as extended family and worries that they are the breadwinners for their families.

She notes it's hard to find people who can keep up with her in the field. Migrant workers are hands-off, and very efficient, she says, and replacing them could cost her in terms of labour, management and training.

For now, Foote has taken to on-farm, mini-markets and online sales to keep working. She's had to hire packing staff, and a Canadian crew on the fly.

"We're adapting, but it's a lot of work," she says.

Foote has seen an increase in customers since COVID-19 started, something she attributes to people being unable to find what they need at grocery stores.

"It is my responsibility to feed my community," she says, while adding she hopes people are beginning to realize how fragile the local food network is.

"The statistics are staggering about how much farmland we're losing," she says. "The next time something like this happens ... There won't be enough farmers to step up to the plate, if the borders are closed, to feed you."

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