

LABOUR SHORTAGE CONTINUES TO PLAGUE AREA FARMERS

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It has been a good season from a "retail point of view" for Bob Trenwith, owner of Stonehaven Farms in north Halton. However, he does lament the weather.

"The weather has been lousy and has hindered everyone in agriculture," Trenwith said.

But his headaches — similar to those facing farmers in Halton Hills and across the region — don't stop there.

"The biggest hang-up in agriculture right now and in most industries, is there's just no labour," he said.

"With the programs that are out there and whatever has gone through people's minds is that they just decided not to go back to work," Trenwith believes.

"Everybody is scrambling and trying to find labour, especially agriculture."

The combination of the unideal weather and lack of labour has created a unique problem. The pumpkins grew too large this year, causing them to need to be hand-picked rather than machine picked.

The slower harvest coming with physical labour has meant that weeds have germinated among the crop and lowered the quality.

"We did get enough weed control done that we were

able to harvest the pumpkin crop," he said.

A July 2021 report by the National Farmers Union says that small to mid-sized farms are actually job creators. However, even it cannot ignore "a shortage of living-wage agricultural jobs which has led to a scarcity of skilled and experienced workers."

"After 30 years of free trade agreements, a capitalist global food system has decreased the market value of many agricultural commodities and ultimately set the wage floor to the lowest paid farm workers in the world," the report adds.

"Labour has been a challenge for a number of years in agriculture, especially the intensive vegetable and fruit operations and greenhouse operations," Director of the Halton Federation of Agriculture Barb Parker said.

"And then COVID has made it worse, a lot worse the last two years," she added. "The workers that would have before done that type of work had the decision or choice to make that they would consider staying home and look after family."

Agriculture across Canada has been one of the main recipients of migrant labour since the 1960s. An estimated 613,200 foreign workers held permits in 2016. Foreign temporary workers are a common



Graham Paine/Metroland

Bob Trenwith of Stonehaven Farms is among many farmers who's faced labour shortages and weather-related challenges this year.

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source of labour in the agriculture industry.

David MacTavish of Hutchinson Farm says that he often hires foreign labourers to work his land on the far northern reaches of Burlington. "I have four Mexicans who come up every April and until sort of end of October. And yeah, I

could not do this without them," he said.

MacTavish says that he would also like to hire Canadians but admits that hiring them is tough.

"I had a resumé in from this nice young man who lived in Ghana. And I've probably got close to 100 resúmes from around the

world from people wanting to work here. How many Canadians have applied? Zero."

But it is even tougher for Trenwith of Stonehaven.

"The retail part of our business, our farm market, gets responses. But I am not getting responses for general farm labour," said the Campbellville farmer.

The Province of Ontario is "investing \$1.5 million to support projects in the agri-food sector that identify and address labour challenges," said spokesperson for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Christa Roettele. Starting Oct. 21, projects that support, promote and attract labour for agri-food businesses will be eligible for up to 70 per cent funding of approved ex-

penses to a maximum of \$250,000.

"Customers definitely want to see local products on the shelves," said spokesperson for Sobeys, Sarah Dawson.

"Wherever possible, we endeavour to spotlight local producers and farmers with in-store materials such as banner stands." Some examples of producers Sobeys buys from include Harvest Goodies, Scholtens-Cottage Country and LumberHeads Food Co.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With a labour shortage gripping the Ontario farming industry, we wanted to explore how local farmers are faring during this uniquely challenging period.

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