

The other crisis: The labour shortage in our food-supply chain

While the pandemic drags on, another crisis is unfolding in the background — one that will affect Canadians from coast to coast to coast by limiting what they find on their grocery-store shelves and dinner tables.

Canada's largest manufacturing employer, the food and beverage industry, is facing a debilitating labour shortage that threatens to cripple Canada's food system as we know it. Companies that together employ nearly 300,000 Canadians were reporting vacancies of above 20 per cent, even before absences due to COVID-19.

The pandemic has compounded a crisis of worker burnout, early retirement, a shortage of skilled tradespeople, and workers leaving congregate environments, among other chronic problems.

The lack of desperately needed labour forces companies to drop product lines, discontinue production, import goods from the United States, postpone plans to expand, and pause efforts to innovate — measures we surely all agree are unsustainable and not what we expect from our critical infrastructure, especially our domestic food system.

While the crisis is multi-faceted, with many economic repercussions to consider, more critical is its potential to jeopardize Canadian food security, affordability, and access.

At the end of last year, I rose in the Senate chamber to highlight food insecurity in Canada. I remain appalled that, despite living in one of the world's leading agricultural and agri-food nations, more than four million Canadians, more than a quarter of them children, have had trouble accessing affordable and nutritious food. This, according to national data compiled in 2018 by the PROOF research team at the University of Toronto, the most recent available. This tragic trend is on the rise, and will continue if we don't fill the labour shortage and remove other obstacles to access to food.

To fill the immediate need for relief, associations that represent Canadian manufacturers of food and beverages — Food and Beverage Canada, Le Conseil de la transformation alimentaire du Québec, the Canadian Poultry and Egg Processors Council, Food and Beverage Ontario, the Canadian Meat Council, BC Food & Beverage, the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, the Baking Association of Canada, Food & Beverage Manitoba, and Food & Beverage Atlantic — have proposed an Emergency Foreign Worker Program to Agriculture and Agri-Food Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau and to the government.

"The sector can no longer manage these vacancies, and a reduction in domestic food production will be inevitable," said Kathleen Sullivan, CEO of Food and Beverage Canada, in a meeting earlier this month.

This contraction also harms the communities where plants operate and provide jobs.

These associations hope their proposal provides a short-term solution that complements longer-term measures, such as introducing pathways to permanent residency specific to workers in food and beverage manufacturing, and piloting a program to direct refugees to the sector.

Companies of all sizes and in all sectors, in Canada and worldwide, are short labour. But our food manufacturers' inability to secure a strong and stable workforce affects both Canada's food security and its economic recovery.

It's critical that Canadians understand the problem and its effects. It's also essential that the government work with the industry to find an immediate solution to food-supply disruptions, while developing long-term solutions to strengthen and enhance our food-manufacturing industry, thereby supporting Canadians for generations to come.

Sen. Rob Black represents Ontario and is chair of the Canadian Senators Group.

Originally published in iPolitics