



Draft\ Working document

Temporary Foreign Agricultural Workers and COVID 19 Safety Considerations

Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW)

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Temporary Foreign Agricultural Workers (TFAWs) have been identified as a vulnerable population by healthcare and occupational health and safety experts. The ongoing challenges this group faces in hazard communication, health care access and service navigation, as well as the coordinated 'grouping' of these workers in their travel, work, and housing (often in shared barracks\ bunkhouses) are among important factors to consider for their COVID 19 safety, and for that of Canadians.

The following draft guidance identifies health and safety considerations in the context of TFAWs traveling, arriving, and working in Canadian agriculture during the COVID 19 outbreak. Many of the issues identified will require significant review, as solutions are complex and unclear. However, the goal of this initial guidance is to contribute to critical thinking and planning.

In addition, we recommend that a public health expert with a strong understanding of COVID 19 safety, be directly involved in finalizing the safe entry and work of TFAWs in Canadian agriculture during this outbreak. Although we recognize the agricultural sector's years of experience coordinating TFAWs, COVID 19 introduces challenges that require an acute understanding of pandemic planning and response in the context of a vulnerable population, as well as of community health care capacity, and health and safety in the workplace. Not addressing key factors may put many at risk.

OHCOW has fifteen years of experience working with Ontario temporary foreign agricultural workers, their employers, community partners and the local health care providers who serve them

Topics reviewed in this document

Worker pre-departure from home country

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2. COVID 19 worker education- pre-travel
3. Sending country travel precautions
4. Developing a COVID 19 safety plan template for farms to finalize and use

Arrival and work in Canada

5. Screening workers arriving to Canada and safe transportation to farms
6. Communicating COVID 19 safety plan to arriving workers
7. Ensuring workers feel confident to report sickness to management
8. Two week quarantine period and worker housing conditions
9. Ensuring sufficient groceries and essential goods for workers during quarantine period and beyond
10. Connecting workers to available wellbeing supports that can be offered virtually or remotely, to help during the quarantine period and during social isolation that will follow
11. Preparing the workplace for COVID 19
12. Supporting OHS in farming operations during the COVID 19 outbreak
13. Supporting workers who may become sick during and after the quarantine period
14. Supporting workers who require COVID 19 testing and or healthcare support

Worker pre-departure from home country

1. Worker Screening and Assessment Pre-Travel

- **Consider logistics for appropriate screening of workers scheduled to travel to Canada.**
Screen workers who are scheduled to travel to Canada under this program, to ensure none of these workers are currently presenting with possible COVID 19 symptoms or are not under recommended quarantine (in their home country) due to possible exposure concerns. Pre-travel screening will decrease the chances of admitting workers currently suspected of having COVID 19 into Canada, and allow any infected worker to recover at home.
- Will sending country governments coordinate and provide this screening? They may decide to have registered workers call in for over the phone screening or assessment. Determine and recommend the most effective screening method.
- Will appropriate Canadian government\ healthcare representatives have a role in this screening?
- If a worker currently scheduled to travel to Canada is identified as presenting with possible COVID 19 symptoms or is identified as currently suspected to have been exposed, will they be excluded? Will they be replaced? How will exclusions and replacement look and be coordinated? Will excluded workers be assured that they will retain their employment in following seasons, as not to penalize (and create a disincentive for) workers with possible COVID 19 exposure?

2. COVID 19 Worker Education- Pre-Travel

- Once workers have been screened and accepted to travel to Canada, ensure these workers are **educated on key COVID 19 safety messages** prior to home country departure, to ensure they know how to take precautions to reduce likelihood of exposure during their travel, arrival and work in Canada.
 - Consider coordination with sending country government to determine whether COVID 19 educational resources and materials already exist that are language, literacy and culturally appropriate, and that can be used for worker education. E.g. The Mexican government has produced COVID 19 safety videos and info graphics in Spanish: <https://www.gob.mx/salud>
 - Prior to COVID 19, occupational health and safety experts, as well as health care providers have identified challenges faced by some TFAWs in engaging with safety and health information, mostly due to language and literacy barriers. Consider these possible barriers to ensure COVID 19 education is understood by these workers.
 - Will sending country governments commit to providing this education to workers prior to departure?

- Consider whether appropriate Canadian government representatives\ public health experts should review what safety messages need to be included in this education to ensure alignment and standardization.
- Consider providing recommendations on the delivery of this education to reduce the risk of large group in-person education prior to traveling to Canada.
 - Consider recommending over the phone education, possibly as a follow-up step after phone screening. This phone education could be pre-recorded or live. The option to connect live with someone may provide workers opportunity to clarify information or ask further questions.
 - Video, audio or info-graphic resource could also be shared with workers via cellphones\ computers\internet access. However, these options will be limited to workers with access and dependent on internet literacy.
 - If phone or remote access to information among workers is not possible, consider safety precautions for in-person education, such as presenting information to workers in small groups with in person social distancing.

3. Sending Country Travel Precautions

- Reduce the likelihood of exposure to COVID 19 by considering\ recommending **safe travel precautions** for screened workers scheduled to travel. The goal of this is to attempt to reduce the exposure risks to screened workers as they travel.
 - Precautions during travel from home to sending country airports
 - Is there local home country guidance for safer travel to local airports?
 - Precautions during airplane travel
 - Are there best practices in flight travel safety for these workers?
 - Is it feasible to reduce the number of workers per flight, and increase the number of flights, to support the opportunity for social distance on these flights?

4. Developing a COVID 19 safety plan template for farms to finalize and use

- Develop a COVID 19 safety plan template for farms that addresses the factors identified. Ensure farm management finalizes a plan to fit their operation.
- Consider including the following, and any additional topics, as part of farm COVID 19 plan requirements (some of these topics are reviewed further in this document).

Draft Farm COVID 19 Safety Plan

- Safe pickup of workers from Canadian airports and safe travel to farms.
 - Communicating COVID 19 safety plan to arriving workers
 - Plan for ongoing COVID 19 safety communication (E.g. check ins, safety assessments and announcements)
 - Plan for communicating with non-English speaking workers.
 - Safe worker housing and COVID 19
 - Worker two week isolation\ quarantine
 - Guaranteeing groceries and essential goods for workers during quarantine period.
 - Guaranteeing groceries and essential goods for workers following quarantine period.
 - Connecting workers to available remote\virtual wellbeing supports to help with quarantine period and with continued social distancing that may follow. E.g. mental health\ stress support, faith based support, phone\internet access to connect with family etc.
 - Preparing the workplace for COVID 19.
 - Social distancing
 - Workplace Hygiene (including personal hygiene in field locations) and routine environmental cleaning, including in housing.
 - Workplace Controls
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - Responding to sick workers at the workplace.
 - Considerations for supporting OHS in Farming operations during COVID 19 outbreak.
 - Supporting workers in feeling confident to report sickness\ feeling sick to management.
 - Explain how sick workers will receive financial support while recovering, to remove some financial pressure that could result in workers not reporting sickness.
 - Responding to a worker becoming sick during quarantine period.
 - Responding to a worker becoming sick after quarantine period.
 - How to support a sick worker recovering in quarantine.
 - How to support a sick worker requiring screening or health care support.
 - Identifying local health care access strategy
 - Connecting to local health care
 - Transporting sick worker to local health care.
- Determine how farm plans will be assessed and confirmed. **(Without proper COVID 19 planning, farming operations employing these workers could find themselves in very complicated situations that could risk the health (and even lives) of these workers, those of farm management and other Canadians).**

- If a farm does not have a COVID 19 safety plan, or is identified as not having the capacity or resources to coordinate the COVID 19 safety of these workers, what will happen?
- Will the government provide support? If so what will this support look like?
- Will farms be excluded from accessing these workers if they cannot effectively coordinate their safety?

Arrival and Work in Canada

5. Screening workers arriving to Canada and Safe Transportation to Farms

- Consider whether there will be additional screening of workers when they arrive to Canada, or will they just be advised to self-quarantine following arrival?
- Precautions during travel from Canadian airport to agricultural worksite/housing.
 - Review how workers will be safely picked up at Canadian airports by farm management. **Can we reduce the number of workers traveling together in a single vehicle to support social distancing?**
 - What level of engagement between farm management and workers would result in a concern for the possible exposure of farm management? Will they be advised to self-quarantine after contact with arriving workers?

6. Communicating COVID 19 Safety Plan to Arriving Workers

- Having all farm staff, including workers, review and understand their workplace COVID 19 safety plan is essential to ensuring precautions and protocols are followed, and to have everyone do their part in protecting the safety of all farm staff and surrounding communities.
 - Ensure farm management reviews their COVID 19 safety plan with all workers and staff as soon as possible.
 - Determine how farm management will share this information **with non-English speaking workers**. Prior to COVID 19, occupational health and safety experts have identified challenges experienced by farm management and non-English speaking workers in maintaining two-way health and safety\ hazard communication. Therefore, at this time when hazard and safety communication is vital for COVID 19 safety, ensure farm management has a clear plan to ensure communication with non-English workers.
 - Provide recommendations on how to share information with workers with consideration of social distancing recommendations.

- Ensuring workers are informed, understand quarantine requirements, or understand what is to happen if a worker gets sick, while also being provided the opportunity to have any questions or concerns answered, is vital to ensuring they follow guidance, while helping to reduce any stress they may experience.
- As part of this, farmers should review how COVID 19 communication between farm management and workers will be maintained throughout the season, so that workers know how to engage with management on this issue. Review how non-English workers will be included.

7. Ensuring workers feel confident to report sickness/feeling sick to management

- Prior to COVID 19, occupational health and safety experts and researchers have identified challenges in ensuring temporary foreign agricultural workers feel confident reporting workplace injuries or illnesses due to some workers being concerned they may lose their employment if they do so. Since identifying sick workers is vital to effectively responding to COVID 19 on the farm, it is very important that workers feel confident in self-reporting sickness.
- Consider clarifying how workers who may become sick during the season, will be supported during recovery, and how their future employment will be protected.
- Consider how quarantined or sick workers can still access financial support during recovery in Canada, to ensure there is no pressure to continue to work while feeling sick/ or downplaying sickness.
 - Consider what financial support would look like for quarantined or sick workers, whether EI should be extended to these workers, or an alternative payment scheme developed.
 - In Ontario, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) extends its coverage of TFAWs to their bunkhouse. Consider engaging with WSIB and their provincial counterparts, to clarify compensation options for workers who may become sick through workplace exposure.

8. Two Week Quarantine Period and Worker Housing Conditions

- **Consider how temporary foreign agricultural workers will follow the two-week self-quarantine precautions suggested for all arriving travellers**
 - What should precautionary isolation look like for these workers? Will a complete individual isolation be recommended? If so how will this occur if most workers are housed in shared rooms, in group housing?
 - Will all workers be treated as a “quarantined group”, as might be the case with a “quarantined family”, and therefore assumed to share the same exposure\ health status in the context of COVID 19?

- **Consider Safe Housing Conditions for Workers in the context of COVID 19**

- Prior to COVID 19, local public health agencies have looked at temporary foreign agricultural worker housing through the lens of safe housing standards. Engage with public health experts to determine standards for the safe COVID 19 housing of these workers.
- **E.g.** Will the number of workers per housing be reduced? What should be the ratio between the number of workers and shared washrooms? Will the distribution of workers in housing be arranged in a way to support social distancing? Or will workers be treated again as a “quarantined group”, with social distancing concerns waived?

9. Ensuring sufficient groceries and essential good for workers during quarantine period and beyond

- Consider how to ensure workers will have sufficient groceries and essential goods during quarantine.
- Consider providing recommendations in the case farm management or others take on retrieving\ providing groceries and goods, to reduce the potential exposure of these individuals to quarantined workers.
- Following the isolation\quarantine period, what recommendations would be provided on workers accessing groceries and essential goods?
 - Will the accessing of these goods be under the coordination of farm management? Or will workers have the opportunity to travel off farm to retrieve these good themselves? If so what transportation options will they have? What safety recommendations should they be provided?

10. Connecting workers to available wellbeing supports that can be offered virtually or remotely, to help during the quarantine period and during social isolation that will follow

- Consider connecting workers to any available wellbeing support that can be offered virtually or remotely. This can help workers during the quarantine period, as was as during social isolation that may follow. **E.g. Mental health and stress support, faith based support, among others that may be available.**
- Ensure worker housing is equipped with resources to access virtual or remote wellbeing support during quarantine period and social isolation. **E.G. Phone access (recognizing safe phone sharing precautions), Wi-Fi access to support individualized internet cell phone use, to enable contact with family back home for social support.**

11. Preparing the workplace for COVID 19

- Provide farm management with best practices in preparing agricultural workplaces for COVID 19 to reduce risk of exposure at the workplace. Consult best practices being developed. Some example of these resources include:
 - <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>
- Review best practices in workplace COVID 19 safety, including:
 - Social distancing
 - Workplace Hygiene (including personal hygiene in the fields), and routine environmental cleaning, including in housing.
 - Workplace controls (engineering and administrative controls)
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - Identification, separation, and support for sick workers.
- Once best practices are identified, ensure these are provided to farmers, included in their COVID 19 safety plan, and reviewed with all staff including workers during initial COVID 19 safety briefings. It will be important for all farm staff to follow and contribute to these practices.

12. Supporting OHS in Farming operations during the COVID 19 outbreak

- Provide farm management with best practices in contextualizing their occupational health and safety program, policies and practices to the COVID 19 reality. This will ensure farm hazard safety is effectively maintained during this time, but done so in alignment with COVID 19 safety measures.
- As part of this, **recommend that farm management review employer and supervisor duties** under provincial OHS acts. For example, the OHS duty to inform workers of workplace hazards, and the duty to take every precaution reasonable to protect the health and safety of workers, support COVID 19 safety, and farming OHS under this outbreak.
- Similarly, recommend farm management **review OHS rights with workers**. The right of workers to be informed of workplace hazards, the right to participate, ask questions and contribute to OHS, as well as the right to refuse unsafe work, are all important pillars to support COVID 19 safety, and farming OHS under this outbreak.
- Once OHS best practices under COVID 19 are identified, ensure these are provided to farmers, included in their COVID 19 safety plan, and reviewed with all staff including workers during initial COVID 19 safety briefings. It will be important for all farm staff to follow and contribute to these practices.
- Consider engaging with provincial Ministries of Labour, in case they have useful resources or information on workplace support.
- Consider engaging with provincial workplace injury and illness insurance and compensation boards, to clarify COVID 19 workplace related coverage and compensation, as well as clarify whether regular coverage and compensation processes have been affected under COVID 19.

13. Supporting workers who may become sick during and after the quarantine period

- Develop best practices in responding to a worker becoming sick during the quarantine period. Once best practices are identified, ensure these are provided to farmers, included in their COVID 19 safety plan, and reviewed with all staff including workers during initial COVID 19 safety briefings.
- Develop best practices in responding to a worker becoming sick after the quarantine period. Once best practices are identified, ensure these are provided to farmers, included in their COVID 19 safety plan, and reviewed with all staff including workers during initial COVID 19 safety briefings.
- **Consider:** If a worker becomes sick during the quarantine period, or after this period, should it be presumed that any workers sharing their living area are exposed? If so what actions should these workers take? And how will this effect on-farm coordination?
- Where will sick temporary foreign agricultural workers self-quarantine? Do they continue to live in shared housing with other workers? Or should they further isolate? And if so where?
- **What guidance and support will be available to sick workers for self-quarantine recovery?**
- When these questions and others related to sick workers are clarified, best practices should be shared with farmers, included in their COVID 19 safety plan, and reviewed with all farm staff.

14. Supporting workers who require COVID 19 testing and or healthcare support

- Develop best practices in responding to a sick worker who requires COVID 19 testing and or healthcare support. Once best practices are identified, ensure these are provided to farmers, included in their COVID 19 safety plan, and reviewed with all staff including workers during initial COVID 19 safety briefings
- **Health care coverage and access:** Many temporary foreign agricultural workers face a barrier to access health care due to a delay on receiving proof of their provincial health care coverage (health cards), not having this proof on hand, experiencing a three month coverage delay, or being unsure about coverage.
 - In light of COVID 19, Ontario has waived the three month wait period for coverage, and extended coverage for COVID-19 services to uninsured people. Consider these policies for other provinces, and ensure farm management and workers are made aware of these policies to ensure access to care is clear and without deterrent.
- **Identifying and mapping local health care access.** From recent engagement with some local Ontario health care clinics in the communities where workers will be arriving to, it becomes clear that each clinic may have their own guidance of how patients should engage with their services. **E.g. some require a phone call prior to in-person arrival at their service location.**

- As part of their COVID 19 plan, **ensure each farm identifies a local health care access strategy**, clearly identifying how staff is to connect to local health care services, and what assistance will be available to do so. Ensure farm management reviews this information with all staff during initial COVID 19 safety briefings, and ensure non-English speaking workers are included in this.
- **Engaging local healthcare services and public health representative.** As part of their COVID 19 plan, ensure farms connect with their local healthcare clinic and public health units, to notify these services of the arrival and presence of these workers in their catchment, to **ensure local services are aware, and consider these workers in capacity and preparedness assessments.**
 - Have government representatives or public health experts connect with local public health units to notify these agencies of the arrival and presence of these workers in their catchment, to **ensure local services are aware, and consider these workers in capacity and preparedness assessments.**
- **Addressing health care access barriers in local health services.** Prior to COVID 19, health care experts have recognized that temporary foreign agricultural workers experience barriers to health care service access and navigation. Factors such as language, literacy, transportation, and service navigation experience, are among barriers affecting access.
 - Consider recommending local health care services develop a protocol to ensure their services review and address the access needs of these workers and other vulnerable populations in their communities.

These are some of the factors that need to be considered and planned for in the safe admittance and work of temporary foreign agricultural workers during the COVID 19 outbreak. However, we recommend reaching out to other key stakeholders in the fields of public health, local health care provision, and occupational health and safety to ensure the best intelligence is reviewed to ensure effective planning.

The Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) is interested in continuing to support this work as it goes forward. We can provide addition, more detailed OHS recommendations, as well as connect relevant partners to this initiative. Our staff includes OHS professionals, including nurses, occupational hygienists, ergonomists, and contract physicians.

For more information on these considerations contact:

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