

LOOK ABROAD

for skilled farm labor

Finding, attracting and retaining reliable staff is one of the biggest hurdles to running any business — farming included. Several industries, like trades, manufacturing and processing, face a shortage of skilled workers due to increased domestic demand for certain skills and an aging population. This pinch has employers looking far afield for help, from eastern Europe to South America and beyond.

Anton Borst farms at Elm Creek, Man. His dairy and beef operation employs approximately 14 people full time. He feels fortunate to have always found help when needed, but he says 2 weeks' notice — especially when an employee leaves in the busy seasons — does not give him enough time to find replacements. Borst has considered looking outside Canada for help, but uncertainty about where to look, how to find qualified workers and what it will cost to bring them to Manitoba has kept him out of the immigration game.

Farm employers in Alberta and western Saskatchewan have the extra burden of competing with the oil industry for staff. Ryan Gibson farms with his father near Vermilion and says drawing out of the same labor pool as the oil industry has made keeping staff difficult. Matching oil patch wages isn't easy for a farm.

Gibson's next step may be to look outside the country for help, but the process has to be simple and quick to appeal to him.

With high turnover and scarce applicants becoming the norm, the job market seems ripe for a change in the way employees are found and hired. A few law firms with experience in immigration have picked up on the trend. They are capitalizing on the worker shortage by diversifying into recruiting and job placement.

"Farmers, like many business owners, have traditionally found their employees locally, but that reality is changing," says Ken Zaifman of Zaifman Law in Winnipeg. "In the past 5 years, it has become apparent that those workers are leaving rural areas and exploring other careers."

Have skills, will travel. Is your next farm manager toiling in the soil or tending the herds of some far-off continent?

By Lyndsey Smith

Zaifman is president of Network Canada, his law firm's offshoot company developed specifically to answer the call for skilled laborers. "Companies come to us with a job description and their specific needs and we explore which federal program might be used in order to bring suitable candidates to Canada. We then do the initial assessment of applicants and leave hiring up to the employer."

It takes about 2 to 3 months to find and select workers, Zaifman says, and the work permit usually follows quickly thereafter. He stresses that this isn't just about finding extra bodies to run the combine. It's also a viable way to find long-term staff, like barn managers and skilled help. "After all, pigs and cattle don't speak any specific language," he adds.

Immigrant agriculture workers come to Canada through 2 programs: the Seasonal Agricultural Workers (SAW) program, and the provincial nominee programs. The SAW pro-

gram is for short-term and temporary employment, where participants work 6 to 8 months at a time and return to their home country. The fruit and vegetable industry uses the program to bring in workers from Mexico and other warm climates.

Nominee programs are tailor-made for bringing long-term and permanent residents to Canada. Companies like Network Canada can help with the paperwork and legalities. Employers can expect to ante up some cash to hire a recruiter like Network Canada, but for those larger employers looking for multiple hires or for long-term skilled staff it may be money well spent.

Finding a farm manager or hired help might still be possible through contacts at the coffee shop, but those opportunities are becoming few and far between. It might be high time to brush up on your German, Spanish or Polish and give your local immigration matchmaker a call. **cc**

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