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An Okanagan Valley apple orchard
in British Columbia.



FEATURE

The food growers

*Rotary members support the farmworkers who help feed Canada
and become their seasonal neighbours*

In his early years of farming, Jim Hughes had a hard time finding enough local help to grow fruits and vegetables on his land along Lake Ontario. For one thing, the seasonal work can be physically demanding — and most Canadians want yearlong employment.

In the 1970s, he turned to a government program that connected him with migrant workers. “We couldn’t have operated without it,” says Hughes, a past president and honorary member of the Rotary Club of Picton, Ontario, a distinction given for his many years of service.

Hughes, who is retiring after 60 years in the business, has employed as many as 16 migrant workers at a time from Mexico and the Caribbean, people who travel from their home countries each year to assist on the farm. Over the years, the farm has produced

crops including strawberries, tomatoes, apples, beans, peas, sweet potatoes, and most recently, blueberries and raspberries.

Hughes has seen firsthand the benefit his employees’ paycheques have had on their families. He has taken trips to their home countries in the offseason and been invited into their houses. “They update their homes. They update their appliances. They buy food,” he says. “And they also educate their children.” A 35-year employee of his farm is set to retire this year, his golden years funded by the Canadian pension he earned through his decades of work, Hughes says.

But the money doesn’t come easy for temporary farmworkers. In addition to their often strenuous job, they have to navigate a new country. While the farmers provide them housing and the migrants

have access to health care, language barriers can make it challenging for workers to ask for and get what they need.

The agriculture industry employed about 70,000 temporary foreign workers in 2023, a number that has been growing steadily, according to government statistics. Broader growth of temporary workers in a variety of businesses is one part of a larger debate in the country about overall immigration policies.

But outside of that political discourse, Rotary members in various clubs in agricultural areas have taken an interest in the well-being of the workers who join their communities for part of the year and have become essential to operating Canadian farms. In recent years, some clubs have brought in speakers to educate members about the obstacles migrants may face,



← The Rotary Club of Fonthill in Ontario supports a health fair for seasonal workers who help in Niagara region vineyards and orchards.

while others have contributed to outreach programs — everything from volunteering at social gatherings to helping aid organizations provide essentials and comfort items like internet access and a space to hang out after work.

In another Lake Ontario farming community, the Rotary Club of Niagara-on-the-Lake has made commitments to help farmworkers because members count them as neighbours. “We are in the middle of fruit and grape growing and so are very much an agricultural base here,” club member Jeannie Manning says. “As a result, when the migrant workers do come seasonally, we see them. They’re in the grocery store. They’re riding their bikes everywhere.”

One of the initial ways the club helped was by volunteering during a peach festival, where workers enjoyed food and music from their cultures, Manning says. Then the club donated lights for workers to use on their bicycles, an important safety measure on rural roads at night, she says. The group paid for Wi-Fi spots so people could reliably communicate with their families at home.

And in recent years, the club has been a partner to the Farmworker Hub, which provides a central location for seasonal

agricultural workers to pick up free everyday items, such as boots, socks, and work pants. The effort started during the COVID-19 pandemic when workers couldn’t readily access stores, including Goodwill and Value Village. Volunteers used the local Buy Nothing Facebook group to gather items that the workers needed, Farmworker Hub founder Julia Buxton-Cox says.

The hub has grown to include an after-hours space where the workers socialize. “We have a social centre, so we have a pool table,” Buxton-Cox says. “We have snacks each week; we play music and have foosball. And the workers can all hang out somewhere other than in their bunkhouse.”

Over the years, the Niagara-on-the-Lake club has helped pay for the organization’s rent and a position that coordinates volunteers, with members also serving as volunteers themselves. “The support, the friendship, the advice, and the guidance they’ve provided has been invaluable,” Buxton-Cox says.

The Rotary Club of Fonthill, another in the Niagara region, has supported a health fair for migrant workers for the past two years that helps people access services. The event, run by the Niagara Migrant

Workers Interest Group, Positive Living Niagara, and the Welland-McMaster Family Health Team, creates a welcoming atmosphere to try to help workers feel a part of the larger community. “They don’t have the knowledge of the health care system here,” says Dave Schulz, public image director and executive secretary of the Fonthill club. “That’s the focus, making sure they know what services are available and making sure that they have resources.”

To increase awareness of the challenges for temporary migrant workers, the Rotary Club of Vancouver Sunrise brought in speaker Hugo Velázquez, who works for MOSAIC, an organization that advocates for the rights of immigrants and other people new to Canada, while also providing them settlement support services.

The club has encouraged members to volunteer through MOSAIC to assist the migrant workers in British Columbia who help in businesses, including peach orchards and wine grape vineyards.

Farmers value the work migrants do and often request that the same people return each year because they know how to do the job well, Velázquez says. “Like picking a strawberry: You can’t just grab it; you’ll squish it. Do you know the techniques? Apples? You have to be tall and strong to get those 20 kilos on your back,” he says. “It’s not low-skilled work. Not everyone can do it.”

When Rotary members ask how they can help migrant workers, he says that it’s important to embrace them in the community. “Tell them they’re welcome, potentially protect them, help them with English,” Velázquez says. “Language is the first barrier.”

— AMY HOAK

By the numbers:

70,000

Temporary foreign workers employed by Canada’s agriculture industry in 2023

1960s

When the seasonal worker program became part of Canadian agriculture

30,000

Number of additional permanent immigrants the agricultural industry may need over the next decade as more farmers retire, according to an RBC Royal Bank estimate