



Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Ontario AgriCentre

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Presentation to Changing Workplaces Review

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Good Morning,

My Name is Peter Sykanda; I am a Policy Researcher with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA). Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you and bring our perspective to this important review.

The OFA is Canada's largest voluntary general farm organization, representing over 37,000 farm families across the province. These farm businesses form the backbone of a robust food system; helping to drive the Ontario economy forward.

Ontario's agriculture sector is a major economic engine, providing jobs in both rural and urban communities. Our farms offer stability to rural communities and represent an integral part of our social fabric by providing a healthy, safe food supply and contributing to environmental sustainability through the protection of soil, water and air resources.

It's fitting that we are speaking with you today just before lunch – I hope that when you break, you make it a priority to enjoy the quality and variety of Ontario's farm products.

Because if it is from Ontario, you can be sure that it has been grown in an environmentally-friendly and sustainable way, that it is safe and nutritious, that it has been grown by farmers who love what they do and care deeply in producing quality food, and that it has been harvested by a well-trained and highly-valued work force.

Before we continue, to be completely clear, the OFA represents the interests of Ontario's farm employers. In that role, we take our obligations to farm workers seriously and believe that all farm workers, from both Canada and abroad, should be treated with dignity, and be provided with a safe, fair, and rewarding work environment.

The Nature of Farming and Work in Agriculture

Agricultural workplaces are different. The nature of farming presents a whole host of workplace challenges that are not seen in the manufacturing or service sector.

At its core, farming involves the management of biological processes and living organisms that are more often than not subject to the vagaries of climatic and environmental conditions. Farming, attempts to control the growth of plants and animals under conditions that are rarely under a farmers' control. And to do this successfully, it requires a very *flexible* approach to managing people, and a *flexible* approach to matching human resources with the demands of food production.



Every year, climate and related soil conditions offer a very short window of opportunity to start a crop for optimum production. This type of situation does not lend itself to a standard eight hour day. Sometimes the days are four hours long, some days are 14 or 16 hours long. This situation is certainly not by desire, but by necessity. Similarly, the length and intensity of harvest varies, driven by a number of climatic or environmental conditions.

This reality of agricultural production and work has not changed, and will not likely change in the future. While some of our agricultural products lend themselves to mechanization – for example much of our grains and oil seeds is mechanized and increasingly dairy, poultry, and swine have seen mechanization - others products absolutely require the gentle touch of a human hand and the judgment of a discerning mind.

Mushrooms, greenhouse flowers, greenhouse vegetables, and field vegetable and fruit cannot be mechanized and require a significant labour force to carefully harvest, pack, and transport to market.

Ontario farms produce hundreds of different kinds of agricultural products. For the majority of these, we compete in a global marketplace – meaning, we must compete against imported products from producers in other countries that do not necessarily operate under the same high standard environmental and social legislation that we have here in Ontario.

Since the inception of the Employment Standards Act, agriculture has functioned under a number of exemptions and special rules as do a number of other jurisdictions in both Canada and the United States. The current exemptions and special rules for each of the four job categories found in agriculture reflect the differences between the farm workplace and the manufacturing workplace.

These exemptions and special rules are directly linked to the fact that:

- For the most part, farming is a seasonal occupation;
- Farming frequently requires a large number of workers for a relatively short period of time;
- We work with biological organisms with their own schedules and their own demands, and;
- We work with perishable products that very quickly can become worthless and unacceptable for human consumption.

The exemptions and special rules recognize the importance to society of our ability to produce food for our own needs, and that we have sovereignty of our food supply.

Farm employers not only compete on a global market, but we must compete in the local labour market to attract and retain workers. Many of our farm employers find alternative ways to compensate for the irregular work hours and break periods we find in agricultural employment. The flexibility granted to farm employers in the Act to be able to produce food for Ontario is returned to workers with a flexibility in work conditions, and is a significant driver for why people choose to work on Ontario's farms.

We ask that you consider the points we've made today during your review of the Employment Standards Act and recognize in agriculture – in food production – where exemptions or special rules exist, they exist with good reason and should remain intact.

We would like you to also consider that in October 2013, the Premier challenged Ontario's agri-food sector to double its growth rate and create more than 120,000 new jobs by 2020. We have enthusiastically accepted this challenge and are on our way to meeting or exceeding it.

Thank you for your time today.