



# **Exploring the Current and Future Workforce Needs in Agriculture Based Businesses**

**A Report by the Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board  
February 2024**

# Acknowledgments

The views expressed in this publication are the views of the Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province. The Government of Ontario and its agencies are in no way bound by any recommendations contained in this document.

## **Mission**

SLWDB is a diverse and dedicated organization, committed to identifying needs and facilitating solutions to attract, train and retain a viable workforce through community partnerships.

## **Vision**

Growing Sarnia Lambton's workforce for tomorrow's economy.

SLWDB leads Sarnia Lambton in its approach to workforce development and labour market planning. The team actively engages organizations and community partners in local labour market projects. SLWDB also conducts consultations with business owners throughout the year in order to identify needs and facilitate solutions to grow the local workforce.

## **Network**

SLWDB is one of 26 local planning board areas that make up Workforce Planning Ontario that are funded to conduct and disseminate local labour market research and engage community stakeholders in a planning process that supports local solutions to local issues.



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## Executive Summary

In 2022, SLWDB embarked on a research project to explore the barriers and facilitators to a career in agriculture. During this work, a gap in our understanding of the workforce needs of those working in the agriculture sector was identified. Therefore, in 2023 SLWDB sought out to explore the agriculture workforce. The aim of the current work was to understand the current and future workforce needs. This report presents the results and delves into the evolving landscape of the agricultural sector in Sarnia Lambton.

The methodology utilized was focus groups and interviews with agriculture-based business owners to gain insights into the agricultural pulse of the region. This approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the data, identifying prevailing themes related to workforce demands, technological shifts, and infrastructure needs.

Key findings included Recruitment and retention challenges, Innovative technologies, Health and safety, Community integration, and Language and technical skills.

To address some of the challenges, key stakeholders were asked to identify strategic recommendations for action. Five recommendations were identified:

- Strengthening workforce and retention
- Training in innovative agricultural technologies
- Developing health and safety materials
- Adaptation to policies and regulations
- Training in Technical and Language Skills

Thus, the purpose of this report is twofold. To share the findings of this research project but also to propose a call to action to address some of the underlying challenges.





## **Introduction**

The agricultural landscape is undergoing changes, driven by factors like retiring farmers, increased land costs, innovations, and labor shortages. This evolving scenario calls for an understanding of the sector as a whole.

Thus SLWDB embarked on a research project to explore the workforce needs and challenges in agriculture-based businesses. This report will share the results of two focus groups and interviews to offer insights into agricultural trends impacting Sarnia Lambton.

## **Methods**

Data was collected through two focus groups (N= 12) and 18 interviews with stakeholders in the agriculture sector. The aim was to gather diverse perspectives on current and future workforce challenges and trends in agriculture.

The data gathered was analyzed to identify prevailing themes identified by the stakeholders. This analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current and anticipated workforce demands, technological shifts, and infrastructure needs in the agricultural sector.

## **Key Findings in Sarnia Lambton's Agricultural Industry**

This report details the five key findings highlighted throughout the focus groups and interviews. These findings illuminate key aspects of Sarnia Lambton's vibrant agricultural industry. These findings collectively help address a diverse range of challenges and opportunities surrounding the following themes:

1. Recruitment and Retention Challenges.
2. Innovative Technologies
3. Health and Safety
4. Community Integration
5. Language and Technical Skills

## Key Finding 1: Recruitment and Retention Challenges in Agricultural Workforce

1. **Expectations vs. Realities:** The difficulty of aligning workers' expectations with the day-to-day realities of the workload in agriculture poses a challenge for retaining workers in the sector.
2. **Logistic Challenges:** Issues like the limited availability of transportation and suitable housing have a direct impact on the ability to retain agricultural workers.
3. **Transportation Challenges:** Problems related to transportation for agricultural workers, including inadequate options, contribute to recruitment difficulties.

## Key Finding 2: Innovative Technologies in Agriculture and Skill Development

1. **Innovative Agricultural Technologies:** The emergence of technologies like self-driving tractors, advanced hydroponic systems, and advanced GPS systems in agriculture represents advancements within the agricultural domain, requiring the acquisition of novel skills and knowledge.
2. **Transition to Less Labor-Intensive Agriculture:** A trend towards new technology and sometimes less labor-intensive agricultural operations, highlights the need for different skills in the workforce and the need for local training to support the development of new skills.

## Key Finding 3: Health and Safety in Agriculture

1. **Health and Safety Training:** Training in aspects of health and safety, including musculoskeletal disorders, labor rights, and workplace safety policies, is considered essential to ensure a safe working environment and compliance with regulations.
2. **Workforce Composition and Safety Concerns:** For some agricultural businesses temporary foreign workers are a crucial factor in ensuring production goals are met. Thus, it is vital to ensure these workers with specialized training needs are properly trained. This includes training in languages other than English and the availability of local upgrading of skills when necessary.

## Key Finding 4: Community Integration in Sarnia Lambton's Agriculture

1. **Financial Challenges:** Farmers are grappling with financial hardships, including escalating loan costs, which can affect farm viability and the attraction of new generations to farming.
2. **Transportation:** The transportation-related hurdles faced by agricultural workers underscores the need for improved transportation solutions.
3. **Housing for Agricultural Workers:** Affordable and accessible housing for agricultural personnel is vital to hiring and retaining a workforce.
4. **Community Integration:** Linguistic (English) training and community integration can support the facilitation of a diverse workforce into local communities and agricultural settings.

## Key Finding 5: Language and Technical Skills Training in Agriculture

1. **ESL and Language Training:** Training in English as a Second Language (ESL) is fundamental for effective communication and safety in agricultural environments, especially for staff and work permit holders.
2. **Machinery Operation Training:** Training in “basic” agricultural machinery operation will help ensure safety and efficiency in agriculture-based businesses.
3. **Specific Training and Certification Needs:** Specialized training programs in advanced agricultural machinery and management and adaptation to new technologies, can support the future workforce as well as upskill the current workforce.
4. **Promoting Agricultural Education in High Schools:** Introducing students to opportunities and careers in agriculture during their formative years can help address workforce shortages and ensure a steady influx of talent into the industry.



## **Key recommendations in Sarnia Lambton's Agricultural Industry**

Through the insights shared by the focus group and interview participants three key recommendations are presented here to promote dialogue and thoughts for next steps.

### **1. Strengthening Workforce and Retention**

- **Promote Greater Labor Expectations Alignment:** Develop programs to enhance understanding of the realities of agricultural work among potential employees, aiming to align their expectations with the actual working conditions.
- **Support Improvement in Transportation and Housing Infrastructure:** Invest in enhancing transportation access and the availability of affordable housing for agricultural workers, thereby facilitating their retention and attracting new employees.
- **Integration and Retention Programs for International Workers:** Offer cultural and linguistic programs to facilitate integration into the local community.

### **2. Training in Innovative Agricultural Technologies**

- **Training Programs in New Agricultural Technologies:** Implement training and upskilling programs in emerging agricultural technologies.
- **Development of Specific Technical Skills:** Encourage training in technical skills necessary for machinery operations, handling advanced machinery, and automated systems in agriculture.
- **Agricultural Education in High Schools:** Promote agricultural education in high schools to spark interest in agricultural careers and address long-term labor shortages.

### **3. Health and Safety in Agriculture**

- **Comprehensive Health and Safety Programs:** Promote the implementation of comprehensive health and safety programs addressing specific risks in the agricultural sector, such as prevention of musculoskeletal disorders and management of work fatigue.
- **Training in Risk Prevention and Occupational Diseases:** Offer ongoing training in health and safety aspects, such as prevention of diseases and accidents related to agricultural work.





## Conclusion

In this report, the Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board (SLWDB) has undertaken an exploration of the agricultural sector in Sarnia Lambton. The findings and recommendations presented here highlight critical areas such as recruitment challenges, the adoption of innovative technologies, and the importance of health and safety practices.

The recommendations, while robust, are just the beginning of a journey towards continuous improvement and adaptation in this dynamic sector. SLWDB recognizes the importance of collaboration among agriculture business owners, government bodies, educational institutions, and the community to effectively implement these strategies.

SLWDB is committed to supporting this journey, facilitating dialogues, and bringing together diverse stakeholders to turn these recommendations into impactful, actionable strategies. Together, we can steer Sarnia Lambton's agriculture towards a path of long-lasting and meaningful development, ensuring it remains a vital contributor to the community and economy.



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