

FARMER INSIGHT: A LOOK AT THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON INDIVIDUAL FARMERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

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The Voorberg family farm is a commercial greenhouse operation, growing cucumbers just outside of Newmarket, ON. It has been around for generations, originally started by Chris Voorberg's grandfather. The farm has never, in that entire time, seen a year like this. "Right now, we've already had a 10% reduction in what we're growing, but with all the uncertainty it could be pushed back further," says Chris Voorberg.

Uncertainty, in conversations CFA is having with farmers across the country, is the worry we hear about the most. For the Voorbergs, right now they do not have confidence in their ability to access labour. Cucumbers need human hands to harvest them, and without enough workers the greenhouses become overgrown, letting product rot on the vine.

In early April, the Voorbergs were expecting four to five temporary foreign workers to arrive on their farm, just like every year for the past few decades. They never arrived.

The Voorbergs were informed that due to a backlog, their workers had not received visas yet. Another four workers are supposed to arrive at the end of April, and the Voorbergs have not received any information on their status. After that, another four to five are scheduled for May and June.

"At this point, the uncertainty is worse than not getting them at all. We can't plan for alternative labour when these guys could show up at any time," says Chris Voorberg. "If our workers don't show up, we'd probably lose 30% of our product in the coming months. If we head into the Fall and still don't have workers, it would take a lot of our acreage offline."

While many Canadians are unemployed and seeking work due to COVID-19, Chris says that hiring workers from Canada is not as simple as it may appear. His first worry is that after hiring domestically, his regular temporary foreign workers show up and he suddenly has double the workforce he needs. With revenue already being reduced, it's not something he can afford.

The second aspect is exposure for the workers he does have that live on the farm, including his family.



The Voorberg family in one of their greenhouses.
From left to right: Trevor, Hilda-Ann, Ron and Chris Voorberg.

"Right now, we have a local worker who takes public transit for an hour to get to the farm. We've asked him to stay home and we're paying him to stay home so that he doesn't pick something up and spread it to the people on the farm," says Chris Voorberg.

"You have to interact with people you don't know through the hiring process. In a lot of ways, having off-farm people come to the property is actually detrimental to our workforce right now."

"A lot of people look down on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, especially at a time when lots of Canadian are laid off, and they think that we should hire those people. They don't understand the amount of training, the safety problems that poses. It's not as simple as people think it is."

Safety is another issue on the farm, as PPE has become more difficult to obtain. "We're able to do social distancing pretty well due to the size of our operation, but there are some areas where it just isn't possible. We do have an increased need for PPE, but our usual sources are saying they are out of stock for months. We're working through farming organizations to try and obtain some."