

THE FARMER'S PLIGHT: A LOOK AT THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CANADIAN FARMERS

Chris Michaud: Mixed messages lead to 70% reduction in vegetable production

By: Matthew Houston, Canadian Federation of Agriculture

- **Chris Michaud and his partners run a vegetable farm in New Brunswick. All their vegetables are sold in Canada.**
- **A week after telling farmers to increase or maintain production, the New Brunswick government banned all temporary foreign workers from entering the province.**
- **Due to the resulting lack of labour, Michaud has been forced to reduce his production by 70%.**
- **Michaud worries this decision by the government will cause food shortages in New Brunswick.**

A week ago, the Government of New Brunswick told Chris Michaud, a vegetable farmer that sells all his produce within Canada, to maintain his usual production levels to maintain food security and sovereignty in the province.

A few days later that same government announced that they would be banning any temporary foreign workers from entering the province.

The results are “devastating”.

“We have to reduce our acreage by probably 70% because we don't feel comfortable planting crops when they can't be harvested,” said Chris.

Chris was planning to bring in eight temporary foreign workers to help harvest his crops in July. While he was prepared to follow all protocols in terms of isolating and quarantining workers for two weeks, those preparations have now all been in vain. The move has left Chris and other farmers puzzled.

“This goes totally against the grain of what they told us to do. It's stirred up quite a ruckus in the farming community here. No one is impressed at what this means. Some farms might not even make it through the year.”

“We found out about it in a press conference. No discussion was had with the industry, no warnings given, no question of the impacts this would have. It's just a slap in the face and a kick in the arse.”

Chris has a core group of about nine local workers that he still will have to work on his farm. But he considers the loss of the eight temporary foreign workers to be much more than 50% of his workforce.



Chris Michaud on his farm.

“Every other farmer I've talked to in the province says that it takes a minimum of four locals to replace one foreign worker, just because of how hard these people work and the training they have,” says Michaud.

“That's what people don't realize. These people are very skilled at what they do. I've been farming all my life and I don't even come close when I'm following these guys harvesting. We have to tell them everyday that no one is allowed to work more than twelve hours a day and no one is encouraged to work more than ten. We have to send them home because they want to keep going.”

In terms of the future, Michaud worries not only about his farm, but for the entire province.

“I've been on the phone this morning with financial institutions telling them they might not be getting much in the Fall in terms of payment. One of our biggest loans is actually with the province. If they are going to do this to us, they might just not get a payment this year. Even if everything went perfectly, at 30% the numbers just don't work,” says Michaud.

“The government needs to talk to the industry and realize the consequences of these actions. They've been talking a lot about local food and food sovereignty in the province.

About how only 8% of the produce bought in New Brunswick is from New Brunswick, and how all that needed to change,”

“The province relies so much on imports, but if countries and provinces start hoarding food, there might not be enough to come in. Meat and processing plants are closing all over the place, I don't think people realize the long-term consequences of this action. Food could get scarce here in December and January, like empty grocery store shelves type of scarce,”

“I hope people don't have to get hungry to realize the importance of farmers.”

“Farmers can't take all the risk. We are, as a group, securing a food source. That's a whole lot different than providing a convenience like a restaurant. It's not a fair assessment to say we are looking for free money. It's more like we shouldn't be taking all the risk to ensure the public can eat. We should have some assurances that Canadian retailers will buy our products. It should be encouraged that Canadian farmers get Canadian retail business so we can keep being there tomorrow to continue to produce food.”