

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

## Mike Medeiros: 20,000 pounds of mushrooms and \$40,000 lost a week from COVID-19

By: Matthew Houston, Canadian Federation of Agriculture

- **Mike Medeiros owns a mushroom farm in Osgoode, ON. His mushrooms sell all across Ontario, Québec and the Maritimes.**
- **Due to impacts from COVID-19, Mike's farm lost \$40,000 per week in March and was forced to throw out 20,000 pounds of mushrooms a week when food banks had no more room.**
- **One mushroom farm in Canada has shut down its grow rooms completely, and laid off 20 Canadian farm workers.**
- **Mike has not been able to access any COVID-19 emergency funding so far and the AgriStability program does not work for his farm.**

Mushrooms grow four per cent per hour, and double in size every day. When restaurants across Canada shut down because of government mandated closures, it immediately wiped out a massive amount of the usual demand for mushrooms. Mushroom farms in Canada lost between 30 to 50% of their markets.

Mike Medeiros, who owns Carleton Mushroom Farms in Osgoode, ON, had to get rid of 20,000 pounds of mushrooms per week go to waste every week as he scrambled to shift his operation. Restaurants usually buy mushrooms in five pound boxes, but now everything needs to be packaged into the eight ounce sealed packages found at the grocery store. Every fresh mushroom in your grocery store is grown by a Canadian farmer just like Mike.

"We've lost forty per cent of our sales from the closure of the restaurant sector. We were losing about forty to fifty thousand dollars a week when the restaurants closed down. There were growing rooms we didn't harvest because there was just no demand for it," said Mike.

One mushroom farm has shut down its grow rooms completely, and laid off 20 Canadian farm workers.

Mike's farm did manage to donate large amounts of mushrooms to food banks and soup kitchens in Ottawa and Montreal so they could at least be consumed, but the reduction in income hurts as the costs to run his business have increased tremendously due to safety protocols related to COVID-19.



Mike Medeiros' Mushroom farm lost \$40,000 and 20,000 pounds of mushrooms a week in March due to COVID-19

"The problem is, farmers are price-takers. We don't set the prices that our mushrooms sell for. So when there's increases in costs, it has to come off the bottom line, and that's what's happening right now," said Mike.

He has no options left to use to offset these new costs.

While government support programs for farmers do exist, such as AgriStability, Mike says that even though he is losing so much money and wasting tonnes of mushrooms, they still do not meet the criteria to trigger a payment. So far his farm has not received any kind of support during COVID-19.

Mushroom farms are also incurring incredible costs to protect their workforce. Face masks, needed not only for COVID-19, but also to protect farm workers from mushroom spores have increased in price up to 1000% since the beginning of COVID-19. Mike predicts that many of the increased costs to his business will persist long after COVID-19 is gone.

"We're going to have to put even more measures to protect our staff. We're looking at putting thermal thermometer imaging device in. We're looking at even more special hand-washing stations and sanitation protocols. Everything is just going to need to continue to be stepped up a notch. We're going to continue to use masks and face-shields even when the virus is gone. I think that's here to stay," said Mike.

## Mike Medeiros cont...

One piece of silver lining in all this is that Mike's staff of 120 full/part-time Canadian employees, since beginning to wear PPE, have not fallen ill from any sickness. Compared to other years, there would have already been a few people calling in sick from the cold and flu.

Mike is also appreciative for his local Member of Parliament who wrote a letter recognizing the importance of farmers and farm workers, which he hung on the farm bulletin board. This had a tremendous effect boosting the morale of his loyal farm team. "When Canada's leaders recognize our farm workers as heroes, the front line of our food supply, this helps motivate our staff during this time of fear, so they know feeding Canada is important, especially during the pandemic."



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