

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

Winkelmolen Nursery: A family farm in more ways than one

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- Nick Winkelmolen helps run Winkelmolen Nursery, which was started by his parents over 40 years ago.
- Founded in 1979, the operation has grown from 15 acres to 900 acres.
- Winkelmolen Nurseries has been using the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) since 1990 to bring in temporary foreign workers for seasonal work. Their longest tenured workers have been coming to work on the farm for almost 30 years, working with Nick as a child and watching him grow up and eventually take over.
- Winkelmolen Nursery also employs 20-25 full-time Canadian employees.
- Nick describes his farm as a family farm in more ways than one, including having three marriages spring from relationships on the farm, including one Canadian marrying a temporary foreign worker.

The Family

"We're a family business," says Nick Winkelmolen, who recently began taking over farm operations from his father with his brother, Jeff. And he means it in more ways than one.

Winkelmolen Nursery has been using the SAWP program to bring in seasonal employees from Mexico since the late 80's, when Nick and his brother were just children. Many seasonal employees from the farm's first years in the program still come down to work on the farm today. Their longest-running seasonal employee has been coming to the farm for almost 30 years.

"A lot of these guys have been here 20+ years. I'm in my mid-30s, so I was a young kid still when they started here. I've grown up working with them my whole life, they're like family at this point," says Nick.

Not only that, as the operation expands and requires more members on the team, Nick asks his current employees if they know anyone who would be interested in working on the farm. Most of the time they reach out to their relatives, so his employees



The Winkelmolen Nursery's staff
amid growing saplings.

currently have a wait list for their next spots when there is a opening.

"We have one group where the dad, his son, his cousins, and his son-in-law are all here. They like working here so if they know someone who wants to be in the SAWP program, they want them to come to where they know it's good to work as well," says Nick.

Apart from the seasonal labour, Winkelmolen Nursery also employs 20-25 full-time Canadian employees, who work side-by-side with the temporary foreign workers. Many of these employees have also been working on the farm for a long time. With so many long-term employees, relationships are bound to happen, both platonic and intimate.

"We've had about three couples meet and get married from the farm, including a full-time staff who married one of the seasonal staff, who is now in the process of becoming a Canadian citizen. We have another seasonal staff member who is now common-law with the daughter of one of our

full-time Canadian staff. I don't know how to explain it any better, but it's very much a family business," says Nick.

Winkelmolen Nursery relies on these seasonal employees every year to make their operation a success, and Nick will be quick to describe his seasonal employees as the best workers he could possibly have. That is why it has been so stressful for Nick to try and keep his operation going while maintaining the safety of his employees and life-long friends during COVID-19. Any outbreak would be devastating on both a personal and financial level.

Keeping employees safe

About 23 seasonal employees had arrived at Winkelmolen Nursery before Canada locked down. Since then he has had 11 more arrive, bringing them up to 35 seasonal employees, ten short of the usual 45 he would get in a normal year.

During that time Nick and his brother have had to navigate a global health crisis, which became more difficult as he received conflicting information from his municipality on best practices to keep his staff safe.

"At first when things started locking down, we asked Hamilton what to do, and they said to treat them as a family unit like others who live together. So that would be their social circle. At that time there was no recommendation for masks, they were telling us not to use them to save them for healthcare workers,"

Since then, the recommendations have changed to keep everyone six feet apart at all times and to always wear masks on the farm.

In order to try and keep his team safe, the nursery had to make some difficult decisions for their operation.

"In a normal year we usually bring about 10-15 students in, and I would have looked for Canadians to help fill the gaps from the seasonal guys who couldn't make it into the country. But this year we felt it was safer to stick with the people we had rather than risk bringing in outside contamination," says Nick.

Because of this decision, Nick estimates that his trees have lost about 15% of value in growth, as he decided to use methods to slow down their growth so his team wouldn't get overwhelmed due to a lack of labour.

With his domestic employees returning home every night, Nick tries to keep the domestic and seasonal workers separate to reduce any chance of an outbreak.

He's also done everything he can to keep his seasonal workers happy on the farm to ensure they don't have to risk leaving and being infected.

"We didn't make them sign a contract or anything, but our seasonal guys haven't left the farm since early March. We've started buying their groceries and making sure everything was available so they had no need to leave," says Nick.

"I am sure they are looking forward to the future when they can go on the weekend and see Niagara falls, the CN tower or a Blue Jays game like other years but for this year they are happy to stay safe and healthy on the farm."

As things began to get worse and news of outbreaks on other farms began to appear, Nick says the workers are definitely in favour of the way they are doing things.

Housing

Nick houses his seasonal employees in four large farm houses on his various farm properties. With the reduction in workers coming in, he's been able to maintain social distancing with 7-12 people in each house.

He has outfitted them with cleaning supplies, sanitizing stations and masks for all his employees.

While he used to have five houses for his employees, one was lost in a fire in late April, thankfully with no injuries.

Online backlash and community support

While Nick has seen backlash for his use of temporary foreign workers online, his community has shown nothing but support during these difficult times.

"Locally everybody knows that a lot of the farmers here really care about their workers. Our guys are very involved in the community here, normally they go to church and help set up the Canada Day Parade in town. The lion's club holds a dinner once a year for all the temporary foreign workers. They get a very warm welcome here," he says.

"When we had the house fire this Spring, our local community donated hundreds of items of clothes and food and all kinds of stuff for our guys,"

"I think most of the backlash is from people who don't actually know much about farming. They see stories in the newspaper and they only see the worst of it. They see stuff that most of us would never do. We have houses for our guys and most of them are nice, old big farm houses with lots of space," says Nick.

On hiring Canadians for farm work

While Winkelmolen Nurseries employs 20-25 full-time Canadian employees, Nick says that finding people willing to work on his farm has always been extremely difficult and time-consuming with little payback, and replacing his seasonal workers would be almost impossible.

"I don't need all my 45 employees to be full-time, and I have enough trouble trying to hire a couple full-time workers locally. I couldn't imagine trying to fill these seasonal positions with Canadians," says Nick.

"I will have guys come in for interviews and offer them the job on the spot because I need to see them actually work. Only about half the people who accept the job even show up on the first day. Out of all those, about two-thirds will not make it past the end of the week."

"You can hire hundreds of people but if you only get one actual employee out of it it's quite exhausting. If I need to get 45 workers next year from Canada because I can't get my seasonal guys in, I'd need to hire like 1000 people at that rate. That's a lot of interviews and training and time to put into something with no result."

"I hear all these stories about how you can hire the local people, but in reality they don't want these jobs. As much as they say they do, they don't show up for them."

"In all honesty, if my seasonal guys couldn't come in next year, I don't know if we'd want to keep going in the future," says Nick.