Sowing the Seeds of Growth.
Temporary Foreign Workers in Agriculture

At a Glance

- Labour shortages within Canada’s agriculture sector have doubled over the past decade and are expected to double again in the next 10 years, reaching 113,800 people. Temporary foreign workers (TFWs) have played a major role in filling the labour gap in the past and will likely need to play a growing role in the future.

- A growing labour gap in agriculture is being driven by a combination of circumstances, including an aging workforce, large seasonal fluctuations in employment, the rural location of many operations, and negative perceptions about working in the sector.

- Simply paying Canadians more to work in the sector or buying more machines may not be possible and will not eliminate the sector’s need for TFWs.

- One way of thinking of TFWs is in terms of globalization; rather than bringing the farms to where the workers are, we are bringing the workers to the farms. Without TFWs it is likely that a significant portion of Canadian farm land would lie fallow.
Executive Summary

Canada’s agriculture sector faces a persistent lack of enough workers with the right skills and in the right places. Over the past decade, the difference between the available supply of domestic workers willing to work in agriculture and the sector’s demand for workers has doubled and is currently estimated at 59,200 people. With the gap expected to double again, reaching 113,800 positions by 2025, the sector appears to be on an unsustainable path.

To date, temporary foreign workers (TFWs) have allowed the sector to fill about three-quarters of its labour gap, such that they now account for more than 1 in 10 people in the sector’s workforce. As such, TFWs have eased much of the labour shortage in the sector and contributed to the growth in agricultural production over the past decade. As well, by alleviating shortages and preventing the closure of agricultural businesses, TFWs have supported the employment of Canadians in the sector.

The agriculture sector’s reliance on TFWs is driven by several factors, including that it has the largest seasonal fluctuations in employment of any major sector. At its seasonal peak, the sector needs about 100,000 more people than at seasonal lows. This is a key reason why more than three-quarters of the TFWs who work in agriculture arrive under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Other factors include an aging workforce, the rural location of many operations, and negative perceptions about working in the sector. All of this means that the sector is having difficulty recruiting and retaining domestic workers.

Many would suggest that the sector should just pay more or buy more machines, but these solutions are not the panacea they would seem. For example, wages in agriculture have risen relative to the average for all sectors over the past 15 years, but the number of Canadians willing
to work in agriculture has shrunk. At the same time, a dramatic increase in the amount of machinery employed per worker has contributed to agriculture experiencing the strongest labour productivity gains of any major sector over the past 20 years. Yet, the sector’s labour gap has continued to expand.

Finding solutions to the sector’s growing labour gap in the years to come is important. This may include re-evaluating the effectiveness of Canada’s immigration programs so that they better meet the needs of the agriculture sector. The need for and use of TFWs in agriculture is also likely to rise in an environment of a growing labour gap. Given this situation, a different way of thinking about TFWs may also be in order. In essence, rather than bringing the farms to where the workers are, as many other types of businesses have done as part of globalization, we are bringing the workers to the farms. This rethink is necessary. Without TFWs it is likely that a significant portion of Canadian farm land would lie fallow.

Background

Labour shortages are a critical and ongoing issue in agriculture. We estimate that the size of the sector’s labour gap has doubled over the past decade, rising to 59,200 people in 2014. This growing gap is being driven by a combination of circumstances. The average age of the existing workforce is steadily rising and this means that retirements are steadily increasing. At the same time, several factors are limiting new entrants, including unusually large seasonal fluctuations in employment, the rural location of many operations, and negative perceptions about working in the sector.

As labour shortages within Canada’s agriculture sector have expanded, the sector has turned to temporary foreign workers (TFWs) to help fill the gap. In fact, TFWs now account for more than 1 in 10 people in the

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1 The labour gap is measured as the difference between the available supply of domestic workers willing to work in agriculture and the sector’s demand for workers.

2 CAHRC, Agriculture 2025.

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Without TFWs, many farm operators indicate that they would have been forced to close, leading to Canadian job losses.
sector’s workforce compared with 1 in 20 a decade ago.\(^3\) (See Chart 1.) TFWs have eased much of the labour shortage in the sector and contributed to the growth in agricultural production over the past decade. As well, by alleviating shortages, TFWs have supported the employment of Canadians in the sector. Many farm operators indicate that they would have closed, leading to Canadian job losses, had they not had access to TFWs. (See “About the Findings.”)

**Chart 1**

**TFWs Account for About 1 in 10 Agricultural Workers**

(share of agricultural workforce at its seasonal peak by source, 2014, per cent)

![Chart showing the percentage of Foreign workers and Domestic workforce](chart.png)

Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Statistics Canada; Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

**About the Findings**

In response to the considerable evidence of labour shortages in the agriculture sector, the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC), supported by The Conference Board of Canada, conducted a three-year research project to examine the labour market situation in Canada’s agricultural industry. The objectives of the research included assessing the current labour market situation; producing projections of labour supply and demand for the agriculture sector; and recommending potential solutions to labour shortages, gaps, and mismatches.

A central element of the project was the construction of an economic model that forecasts agricultural labour demand and supply by industry, by province, and by occupation. The project also involved a survey of and interviews with more than

\(^3\) Ibid.
1,000 employers, workers, and stakeholders in the sector. The results of this research were validated by more than 200 people in the sector through a series of focus groups and webinars held in different regions across the country and covering different commodities within agriculture. This briefing draws upon the research findings of the larger study.

Under the current federally administered TFW program, agricultural employers can use four “streams” to fill temporary labour and skill shortages when qualified Canadian citizens or permanent residents are not available. These include the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), the agricultural stream, the low-wage stream, and the high-wage stream. Each stream has different rules concerning where the foreign workers can come from, the types of farms they can work on, and the type of work they can do. (See “Agriculture-Related TFW Streams Summarized.”)

Agriculture-Related TFW Streams Summarized

Any agricultural employer wishing to hire temporary foreign workers (TFWs) must first successfully complete a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). LMIA are administered by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), which evaluates the impact that hiring a foreign worker will have on the Canadian labour market. A “positive LMIA” will show that there is a need for a foreign worker and allows the hiring of a TFW. Key characteristics for each of the agriculture-related streams include the following:

SAWP
• TFWs must be from Mexico or certain Caribbean countries.
• Production must be included on the National Commodities List.
• Activities must be related to on-farm primary agriculture.
• Positions can be in lower- or higher-skilled occupations.
• The maximum period of employment is 8 months.
• TFWs are exempt from the 48-month cumulative duration cap.
Agricultural Stream
• TFWs can be from any country.
• Production must be included on the National Commodities List.
• Activities must be related to on-farm primary agriculture.
• Positions can be in lower- or higher-skilled occupations.
• The maximum period of employment is 24 months.
• The 48-month cumulative duration cap applies.

Stream for Low-Wage Positions
• Production is not included on the National Commodities List.
• Employers can hire TFWs for any low-wage agricultural position (below provincial median wage).
• The 48-month cumulative duration cap applies.

Stream for High-Wage Positions
• Production is not included on the National Commodities List.
• Employers can hire TFWs for any high-wage agricultural position (above provincial median wage).
• The 48-month cumulative duration cap applies.

*The 48-month cumulative duration cap was enacted in 2014. Where applicable, a TFW who has reached a cumulative duration of employment in Canada of four years would be ineligible to work in Canada until four years have passed.4

Source: Employment and Social Development Canada.5

The SAWP is the stream most commonly used by agricultural producers; the stream accounted for 78 per cent of positive LMIAAs for the agriculture sector in 2015. (See Chart 2.) Feedback from both focus groups and interviews with numerous agricultural producers suggest that the SAWP is popular and that it has worked well in addressing seasonal worker shortages in the sector. The agricultural stream accounted for most of the remaining positive LMIAAs, with fewer than 2,000 positive LMIAAs being issued for the low- and high-wage streams. The popularity of each

4 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Temporary Foreign Worker Program.
5 Employment and Social Development Canada, Hire a Temporary Foreign Agricultural Worker.
stream is likely being influenced by the relative complexity, cost, and time involved in applying for LMIA-s, which varies by stream. As such, demand for the agricultural, low- and high-wage streams would likely increase if these barriers were reduced.

The largest limitation of both the SAWP and the agricultural stream remains their scope, with many farm operators who require TFWs not qualifying for either stream because their commodity is not on the National Commodities List (NCL). Sixteen different primary agriculture commodities are listed on the NCL, but there are major commodities produced in Canada that are not included. For instance, most grain and oilseed producers, the largest agricultural employer in Canada, cannot access either the SAWP or the agricultural stream and must rely instead on the lower- and higher-wage streams, which face different requirements.

It is also worth noting that agriculture is now by far the largest employer of TFWs. In 2015, the sector accounted for 58 per cent of the number of positive LMIA-s issued in Canada. This is a recent phenomenon and

it follows the large fall-off in the number of TFWs coming to Canada after the 2014 changes to the TFW program, including higher fees, limitations on the share of workers who could be TFWs in a workplace, and limitations on how long individual TFWs could work in Canada. The SAWP was exempt from these changes, and the number of workers coming in under that stream has continued to rise as employers seek to fill an increasing number of vacant positions. Some of these changes applied to the agricultural stream, where only a small increase in the number of TFWs has occurred. Finally, all of these changes applied to agricultural employers in the low- and high-wage streams, where positive LMIAFs have fallen dramatically.

**Why Does Agriculture Need So Many TFWs?**

Various factors contribute to the agriculture sector’s reliance on TFWs. To begin with, agriculture has the largest seasonal fluctuations in employment of any major sector.\(^7\) At its seasonal peak, the sector’s employment is 30 per cent above what it is at the seasonal low. In other words, the sector’s demand for labour is heavily influenced by the seasonal changes in Canada’s climate, with agriculture employing more than 100,000 additional people in the peak summer months compared with the winter low period. In comparison, the difference between the seasonal peak and low in employment for all sectors is only 4 per cent.

The seasonal fluctuations are particularly large in horticulture production, where employment at its seasonal peak can be two or even three times above where it stands at its seasonal low.\(^8\) This seasonal pattern requires large numbers of people for labour-intensive work over short periods, making horticulture producers much more prone to seasonal job vacancies that are often filled with TFWs. In fact, TFWs account for nearly one-third of employment among horticulture producers at their seasonal peak, compared with 5 per cent for other types of agricultural operations. (See Chart 3.) As well, horticulture producers account for

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\(^7\) CAHRC, *Agriculture 2025.*

\(^8\) Ibid.
three-quarters of all the TFWs employed in the agriculture sector. The importance of TFW programs for horticulture is exemplified by the fact that several interviewees suggested that there would be no horticulture production in Canada without the SAWP.

Chart 3

Pronounced Seasonal Patterns Make Horticulture Industries More Reliant on TFWs

( agricultural workforce by type of worker at the seasonal peak, 2014, 000s)

Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

Beyond seasonality, there are other factors that make it unusually difficult for agricultural producers to attract and retain domestic workers. First, employers report that many potential workers have negative perceptions about the sector, such as it being too physical or there being long hours. For example, 40 per cent of employers in our survey cited the physicality of work as a labour retention challenge. As well, in 2015, people worked an average of 44.8 hours per week in the agriculture sector, compared with an average of 35.9 hours for all sectors. (See Chart 4.) However, the longer hours worked in the sector are at least partly attributable to the labour shortages it is experiencing. In our survey, many farm operators reported that overtime, fatigue, and stress for existing workers was a major outcome of labour shortages. In other words, long hours appear to be both a result of and a contributor to the labour shortages being experienced in agriculture.
Second, below-average pay is another consideration. Although there are some high-paying occupations in agriculture, only a handful of sectors, including retail trade and accommodation and food services, have lower average wage rates than the agriculture sector. In fact, average wages in the sector are about 25 per cent below the average for all sectors. This wage gap makes it difficult for employers to compete with other sectors in attracting domestic workers.

Finally, agricultural operations are located in rural areas, where populations are experiencing no growth and aging rapidly. People who live in urban areas are often not willing or able to travel to rural locations where agricultural work is located. When combined with their often limited familiarity with agriculture, this makes them less likely to consider

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9 See Statistics Canada, CANSIM table 282-0072.
Many sectors face one or some of the labour challenges that agriculture faces, but few face all of these challenges combined.

a career in the sector. Indeed, in our interviews and focus groups, many farm operators report that they receive no applicants when they advertise job openings.

Many sectors face one or some of the challenges that agriculture faces, but few, if any, face all of these challenges combined. As such, finding ways to inform Canadians about opportunities in agriculture and convincing them of the benefits of working in the sector will remain an ongoing challenge. In the meantime, TFWs have proven an effective solution to address the unique combination of labour challenges that agriculture faces.

Canada’s agriculture sector is not unique in the labour challenges it faces. Other developed countries with sizable agriculture sectors are experiencing similar problems with recruiting and retaining domestic workers. For example, Australian farmers continue to struggle in sourcing domestic labour in spite of a youth unemployment rate of around 20 per cent. As a result, the Australian federal government has recently extended its Seasonal Worker Visa Program to include cattle, sheep, grain, and mixed product farms. Overall, this program is intended to help Australian farmers unable to find local workers recruit from Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste.

The U.S. agriculture sector also relies on foreign workers to overcome labour shortages, particularly on its fruit, vegetable, and dairy farms. Rising labour shortages have resulted from a strengthening U.S. economy, which has opened up opportunities for numerous workers who previously were engaged in farm work. Moreover, a decline in illegal immigration from Mexico also challenges American farmers, with the American Farm Bureau Federation estimating that between half and three-quarters of farm labourers are unauthorized workers in the United States. While the federal H2-A visa program has helped somewhat by

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10 Workpermit.com, *Australia's Seasonal Worker Visa Program Extended Due To “Lazy” Youth.*

providing temporary visas to farmworkers, growers say it is expensive, burdensome, and inadequate because it covers only a fraction of farmers’ labour needs.

**Why Not Just Offer Higher Wages?**

Offering higher wages in agriculture may appear to be an easy solution that would make the sector more appealing for domestic workers. Indeed, after variability in hours, insufficient compensation was the largest retention challenge identified by employers within our survey, with just over 40 per cent of respondents agreeing. (See Chart 5.) Statistics Canada reports that in 2015 average weekly earnings in agriculture were $684, versus $923 for all sectors. In theory, raising agricultural wages should make the sector more attractive, but key questions are how high wages would have to rise and whether farm operators actually have the ability to raise wages.

**Chart 5**

**Key Challenges to Retaining Workers**

(share of respondents, per cent; n = 728)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variability in hours</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient compensation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is too physical</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many hours</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Conference Board of Canada Employer Survey.

The gap between agricultural wages and wages in other sectors has gradually narrowed over time, with agricultural wages rising from two-thirds of the average for all sectors in 2000 to 74 per cent in 2015. Yet, the number of domestic workers willing to work in agriculture has steadily declined. In comparison, another sector that often combines seasonal work patterns with challenging work conditions is construction, where average weekly wages are $1,137. If agricultural wages were to rise to this level, that would mark a 66 per cent increase.

Which brings us to our second question: Could farm operators afford wage increases of this magnitude? The answer is generally no. Many of the products grown by the sector are commodities, meaning that producers have only a limited ability to distinguish their products from others. As a result, prices for their products are generally set with a price ceiling that is decided by regional or global markets. What is more, producers are generally too small to exert much influence on market prices. Raising wages in an environment where prices cannot rise commensurately would erode operator profits, and potentially put them out of business. For consumers, this would mean less availability of local food and an increased need for food imports.

It is also worth noting that additional research on remuneration in agriculture is needed. Statistics Canada’s average wage information is drawn from a variety of commodities and represents many different types of jobs, including both seasonal and year-round permanent positions. Yet, there is great diversity and variability of wage ranges depending on the commodity, position, and region. In other words, not all jobs on farms pay below-average wages even though that may be the perception.

Also, some forms of remuneration may not be fully tracked in the existing surveys. Farm operators spoke of many ways that they try to supplement worker wages in our interviews and focus groups. These included things as simple as meals, to much larger perks, such as assistance in purchasing a vehicle or even partial ownership of the farm. Benefits such as these are likely not being fully captured in the data. However,

13 CAHRC, Agriculture 2025.
even with these accommodations, many farm operators still reported difficulties in recruiting workers. As such, higher pay is not the simple panacea that it may seem.

**Can’t Machines Do the Work?**

Another common suggestion is that instead of hiring TFWs, farm operators should just buy more machines to do the work. In theory this might be possible, but in practice it may not be that simple: many jobs, particularly those typically done by TFWs in agriculture, are not easily mechanized.14 What is more, agriculture has already become far more mechanized over time. The amount of machinery and equipment invested per worker in agriculture has increased by 60 per cent over the past 25 years, four times the pace of growth for the economy as a whole.15 These investments include machinery as varied as GPS-guided combines used on grain farms, dairy cow self-milkers, precision seeding equipment, and drones to monitor crops and orchards.

In combination with other factors, such as better seeds, improved fertilizers, and new farming techniques, rising mechanization has led to a surge in output per worker in agriculture. In fact, agriculture has had the strongest labour productivity gains among all the major sectors in Canada over the past two decades. (See Chart 6.) Yet, even with all of these improvements, the labour gap in agriculture has continued to expand.

Looking forward, a key question is, will agricultural producers be able to continue increasing their level of mechanization? There are still many smaller farms that could potentially benefit from consolidation and increased mechanization. As well, new technologies such as agricultural robotics and automation should continue to support agricultural productivity gains and reduce the need for labour in the future. However, the pace of farm consolidation has slowed in recent years, and there

14 Ontario Federation of Agriculture, *Background.*
15 Calculations based on Statistics Canada’s CANSIM tables 031-0005 and 282-0008.
are limits to which jobs can be mechanized. At some point, the “low hanging fruit” will already have been picked and it will be increasingly difficult for agricultural producers to record productivity improvements. Thus, it is unrealistic to expect that farm operators will continue to be able to increase labour productivity by 4 per cent per year over the next 20 years.

Another consideration is that increased mechanization will change the required skill sets for working in agriculture. Many farm operators reported that the new equipment they were buying required different skills, such as computer operation, that their workforce did not necessarily have. Ironically, this means that the shift to greater mechanization may be partially limited by the general skill and labour shortages that the sector faces. Indeed, in our survey, 41 per cent of

Chart 6
Agriculture Enjoyed Exceptional Productivity Gains Over the Last 20 Years
(average annual change in output per hour worked, 1994–2014, per cent)

Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

16 Hsu, “Rise of the Ag-Bots Will Not Sow Seeds of Unemployment.”
respondents indicated that they were experiencing labour shortages, and among them, 40 per cent had delayed or cancelled investments as a result.

In short, the suggestion that TFWs are an alternative to investing in productivity-enhancing machinery is an oversimplification. The sector’s strong historic productivity growth and rising capital intensity are clear signs that operators are working hard to reduce their need for labour, yet the number of TFWs needed by the sector has risen. In fact, using TFWs may be allowing farm operators to undertake needed investments.

Why Only Temporary?

Although TFWs are a very important part of the agriculture sector, they are in Canada on a temporary, rather than a permanent, basis. As such, TFWs are not classified as immigrants. Indeed, while immigrants are an important source of labour force growth in general in Canada, they account for a below-average share of employment for many of the major occupations within agriculture.17 Put another way, agriculture has not been able to attract a “fair share” of the immigrants who are coming to Canada.

Many agricultural employers suggest that existing immigration programs, with their focus on university graduates, are not well suited to the needs of agriculture.18 With federal immigration policy geared toward higher skilled labour, there is limited facilitation for permanent residency for lower skilled occupations, even though agriculture has a critical need for these workers. Even for agricultural producers keen on assisting interested TFWs in becoming permanent residents, hurdles including experience requirements, application fees, processing and waiting times, and the need for supporting documents remain. As well, only higher-skilled positions such as management, professional, or technical occupations are eligible.

17 CAHRC, Agriculture 2025.
18 CAHRC, Agricultural Workers Needed.
A potential avenue for employers seeking to sponsor TFWs for permanent residency is the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), through which some provinces, such as Manitoba, are working to tackle regional labour shortages within agriculture. However, the focus of the PNP generally remains on higher-skilled workers. As well, in some provinces, agriculture or agri-food workers are not eligible for the PNP, limiting their benefits to the agriculture sector.

Although TFWs are hired to address a specific short-term labour need, given the acute labour shortages in the agriculture sector, Canada should consider offering permanent residence pathways for agricultural workers. A path toward permanence would assist farm operators with finding a permanent solution to their labour challenges. It would also simultaneously address some of the human rights and labour market concerns that are expressed about workers entering Canada under the TFW program.¹⁹

**Conclusion**

Canada’s agriculture sector faces many unique labour challenges, the most prominent of which is the persistent lack of enough workers with the right skills and in the right places. Over the past decade, the difference between the available supply of domestic workers willing to work in agriculture and the sector’s demand for workers has more than doubled, and is currently estimated at 59,200 people. Thanks in large part to the SAWP, the sector has been able to fill about three-quarters of its labour gap with TFWs, such that they now account for more than 1 in 10 people in the sector’s workforce. However, the sector remains on a seemingly unsustainable path, with an ever-growing labour gap that is forecast to double again (to 113,800 positions) by 2025. (See Chart 7.) If the labour gap is left unfilled, it will have serious implications for the future growth of the sector.

¹⁹ Nakache and Dixon-Perera, *Temporary or Transitional*. 
Finding solutions to the sector’s growing labour gap in the years to come is important. This may include re-evaluating the effectiveness of Canada’s immigration programs in terms of meeting the needs of the agriculture sector. The need for and use of TFWs in agriculture is also likely to rise in an environment of a growing labour gap. Expanding the National Commodities List to better reflect the make-up of the agriculture sector is one way to facilitate this need. Indeed, recommendation number 7 in a recent parliamentary committee report related to the TFW program specifically called for study on this issue. Other committee recommendations that could improve the agriculture sector’s access to the TFW program include:

- increasing the speed and efficiency of LMIA reviews;
- implementing a trusted-employer program to reduce LMIA processing times for employers who have demonstrated trustworthiness;
- re-establishing the TFW program into more specific streams;
- ensuring adequate training and education resources for fields most likely to present labour and skill shortages;

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.
• providing seasonal workers with multiple entry visas to allow greater mobility during off-seasons and easing re-entry when a work visa is extended;
• facilitating access to permanent residency for migrant workers who are filling a permanent labour market need.

Finally, there is an alternative way to think of TFWs in agriculture, both in Canada and in other developed countries. Canada has witnessed the loss of a large number of lower-skill jobs, particularly in manufacturing industries such as textiles and apparel, over the past 20 years. The key driver of this change has been globalization, as many of these jobs have migrated to where labour costs are lower. In these other industries, business owners were able to move the machinery and plant needed to create these goods to where the workers were. Farm operators cannot do this; the land and water available for agricultural production are in Canada, not elsewhere, and cannot be moved. Thus, one way of thinking of TFWs is in terms of globalization. Rather than bringing the farms to where the workers are, we are bringing the workers to the farms. From this viewpoint, without TFWs we may face the prospect of a significant portion of Canada’s arable land lying fallow. That would be a tragedy in a world where about 800 million people are food-insecure.21

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About CAHRC

The Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) is a national, non-profit organization focused on addressing human resource issues facing agricultural businesses across Canada. CAHRC conducts industry research and develops products and services designed to help agricultural employers attract, retain, and develop the workforce they need to succeed.

For more information about the Council and its products and services for Canada’s agriculture sector, please visit www.cahrc-ccrha.ca.
APPENDIX A

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