Developing Innovative Agricultural Workforce Opportunities

Since its creation in 1991, the Agricultural Workforce Policy Board (AWPB) has sought cooperation among industry and government representatives, providing a consistent link with and for workers and employers in four broad areas:

- the job market (supply and demand for and of farm workers);
- training and skill development (for farmers, managers, workers and youth);
- creating an awareness of agriculture employment and career paths (for youth, workers, students); and,
- regulation of workplace health, safety, worker standards, wage rates, and benefits.

To ensure that the entire range of the workforce is represented, there is a need to broaden the mandate of the Board, strengthening the relationship between farm workers and employers, and a third level of government, seeking innovative ways to expand on greater understanding and cooperation.

The Board will develop a wider framework to address workforce issues through the following:

I. The establishment of a central body to promote and foster education and skill development and facilitate cooperation between three levels of government.
II. The Board will undertake discussions to restructure and to bring about representation from farm workers.
III. To explore the possible inclusion of Farm Labour Contractors as a representative body.
IV. To initiate discussions with local government in Oliver to evaluate the seasonal labour supply pilot project undertaken and seek advise based on their experience.
V. To develop benchmarks with other jurisdictions and investigate further broad-based approaches to workforce issues.

Part I - The Establishment of a central body to promote and foster education and skill development and facilitate cooperation between three levels of government.

Greater communication with local government with regards to seasonal labour supply issues is essential to broaden the scope and understanding and the development of improved accountability. Seasonal placement services are in place in Kelowna through the First Nations Friendship Society and in Oliver through a joint partnership. To date the Board has not expanded representation with local government to approach seasonal labour supply demands. Developing community approaches for the supply and demand of farm workers and through improved education and skill development may be a possible approach. Over the years resources through multi-public sector agencies have been used to investigate fraud, employment standards abuses, worker education and employer responsibilities. Resources are utilized to "catch" perpetrators but not to provide alternate paths for workers to find seasonal employment. By bringing to the table local government, employers, farm workers and other public sector agencies, the focus moves to the implementation of community responses and partnerships. The Board will work to advance working partnerships to provide a foundation for innovative approaches to seasonal labour supply issues at community levels.

Part II - The Board will undertake discussions to restructure and to bring about representation from farm workers.

To address labour supply issues agriculture requires improved communication with the farm worker community. This is a direction that has been discussed at length with the Board. There is a need for a system that ensures labour supply and the ability of worker to find employment. Seasonal farm workers want continuous work but may not know where to go to find the work. Farm workers will be invited as a representative body to the Board. It is imperative that agriculture
finds ways to bridge the gaps and develop improved understanding, options and access to employment, education and skill development.

**Part III - The Board will also explore the inclusion of Farm Labour Contractors as a representative body.**

Development of communication and understanding of FLC issues is an approach the Board responded to in 1998. The Board will explore the inclusion of FLC as a possible representative body to the Board.

**Part IV - The Board will initiate discussions with local government in Oliver to evaluate the seasonal labour supply pilot project undertaken and seek advise based on their experience that can be used as a model for other communities.**

The Board will ask the Mayor of Oliver to participate on the Board representing local government on seasonal labour supply issues. The seasonal labour supply pilot project came about due to the thousands of transients that make their way to the south Okanagan for the fruit season. A key player in this partnership is the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, the ministry mission is to attract people to the labour market -- connecting employers and workers. The project came about in the summer of 1998 where a Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, Financial and Employment Worker, Martha Mandaric, saw a gap between job seekers and employers need for workers in the south Okanagan (area between and including Keremeos, Cawston, Oliver and Ossoyos). Martha went to the orchards to find out if workers were needed and then relayed information to the clients. This contact initiated the project in Oliver.

The community developed a joint partnership: the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food - providing seed funding, the Chamber of Commerce submitted an application to HRDC (in Penticton) to hire (post-secondary) students. A computer was loaned through the Town of Oliver and cell phones and lobby space and overall coordination through the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security office in Oliver, bridged the gap and made the connection. Some links were made with the Kelowna Friendship Centre although placements were made directly through the work of students.

The Board will work with local government to look at the pilot initiated in this community and if possible apply this approach to other communities to meet the seasonal labour supply demands.

Other partners may be established to address labour supply requirements and communication. During the last growing season labour shortages were reported in a variety of crops in the Lower Mainland. There were periods in Okanagan where the high demand for labour slowed. Greater liaison with communities with regard to seasonal imbalances may be another element to foster greater movement of labour from one community to another.

**Part V - The Board will look at the development of benchmarks with other jurisdictions and investigate further broad-based approaches to workforce issues.**

The economic viability of farming field crop vegetables, berries and some hard and soft fruits must be part of the benchmarking. Comparisons in direct costs with other jurisdictions in addition to a broad look at innovative methods to secure labour supply will be examined. Viability including competitive pricing vs. minimum wage and other regulatory requirements may also be part of the scope. Benchmarking could include how the peak seasonal demand is approached:

- in other provinces
- in other countries
- by highlighting farms that are doing things differently, using innovation, technology to help others
- through specialization and niche marketing
- through applied technology, biometrics, innovation in crop harvesting.
Reporting

Progress reports will be provided to the Agricultural Workforce Policy Board partners.

Communication

The key player in helping to respond to the issues and directions at local and regional levels, was the Agricultural Employment Services (AES) Program. AES was the key delivery arm for the AWPB's objectives at community levels. The AES program ended in the fall of 1995. A seasonal labour exchange in Kelowna through the Native Friendship Centre was in place for the 1996-harvest season. The seasonal labour wing of AES in Abbotsford also ended in the fall of 1995 while funding to provide resources for full and part time year round employment expired in March 1997. Community partnerships work as a mechanism to bridge gaps at local levels. Addressing labour market issues goes beyond adjustment, information, and supply to being an integral part of the community.

There has been a lack of shareholders to address seasonal labour issues since 1997. Many agencies have approached the demands through individuals, who have sought to make a difference and develop partnerships within their own communities. This approach suggests a stronger scope of linkages through enhanced partnerships that may help farm employers, workers and public agencies whose mandates touch agriculture, work together toward the development of a strong workforce accord in the BC Agriculture Industry.

Agriculture has yet to include farm workers as representatives within an organizational structure. Today's farm organizations struggle to define and include who is a farmer. Agriculture is splintering when our influence is dwindling. There is a window of opportunity to improve communication and consultation, develop working approaches within communities. The bottom line is working together in the broader interest of the larger farming community.

If you require more information about the board or agricultural workforce policy issues please contact:

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