

OPINION

# Canada is about to lose more than 100,000 farming jobs. That's great economic news



TONY KELLER >

PUBLISHED AUGUST 1, 2024

UPDATED YESTERDAY



A farmer drives a combine to harvest a wheat crop near Cremona, Alta., on Sept. 18, 2023.

JEFF MCINTOSH/THE CANADIAN PRESS

In the spring of 1891, enumerators for the decennial census fanned out across the country, going door to door to count the population of the Dominion of Canada. They asked about things such as age, religion and education. They inquired as to who could read and write. And they asked [where people worked](#).

The No. 1 job in Canada in 1891: “Farmer.” [More than 408,000 people](#) said that farming was their sole or primary form of employment. The second most

common job: [“Farmer’s son.”](#) There were 240,768 of those. There were also 76,839 “Farm labourers,” and more than 9,000 workers in other agricultural jobs.

At the time, Canada had just 4.8 million people.

I flipped through [the 1891 census](#) the other day, and found that roughly a third of the enumerated labour force, much of it under the age of 15, worked in [agriculture](#). And that was almost certainly an undercount, because while farmers’ sons were classed as workers, hundreds of thousands of daughters and wives mostly were not.

Farming was so central to life in 1891 that the census was the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture.

Fast forward more than a century. Today, just [247,000 people](#) are employed on a Canadian farm or in a nursery or greenhouse. That’s barely more than 1 per cent of the labour force.

Generation after generation, the share of Canadians doing farm work has steadily shrunk, while the volume and value of agricultural output has grown. This miracle is called economic productivity. If Canada plays its cards right, the future will bring more of the same.

A [new report](#) this week from the Conference Board of Canada says that a large share of Canadian farm jobs, nearly 104,000 positions, could be automated out of existence in the next decade. The same goes for 56,000 jobs in food and beverage manufacturing.

Is this bad news? No, it’s great news. More than a century of steadily declining agricultural employment is a big part of how Canada became one of the world’s wealthiest countries. Sustaining that trend in the years to come – through new machines, technology and processes, so that workers tomorrow produce more than today – is how we reach higher productivity and higher living standards.

It’s all about figuring out how to do more with fewer workers. That’s where economic growth and higher living standards come from.

In 2012, the daughter of an Alberta farmer wrote about the remarkable productivity of her family’s farm.

“My dad farms 3,200 acres of his own, and rents another 2,400 – all told, a territory seven times the size of Central Park,” [wrote then-journalist Chrystia Freeland](#). “Last year, he produced 3,900 tonnes of wheat, 2,500 tonnes of canola, and 1,400 tonnes of barley. (That’s enough to produce 13 million loaves of bread, 1.2 million liters of vegetable oil, and 40,000 barrels of beer.)”

All that from just three workers – her dad and two hired hands – plus a few friends helping out a couple of weeks a year, during seeding and harvest.

Back in 1891, it would have called for a large (and mostly poorly paid) [work force](#). Progress since then has been remarkable, spurred by massive investments in labour-saving farming equipment and technology. The Conference Board study predicts more of the same.

All of which should be a reminder that labour shortages and rising wages have economic benefits. Yes, benefits. They are the mother of business innovation and investment, because they force businesses to chase ever greater labour productivity. Particularly when it comes to low-wage jobs, a tight labour market and upward pressure on pay should be the goal of government policy.

However, Canadian businesses in recent years persuaded Ottawa that, no matter the state of the [economy](#) or the level of unemployment, they can’t fill hundreds of thousands of low-wage jobs. But these alleged labour shortages are mostly just businesses facing the pressure to compete for workers by raising wages.

Those pressures have been alleviated by allowing businesses to recruit an effectively unlimited number of temporary foreign workers, at the lowest legal wage, or less. Absent that low-wage release valve, businesses would have to innovate and invest more in new technologies to use less labour, and get more out of each hour of (increasingly expensive) labour.

That’s how we raise productivity. That’s how we grow the economy.

The year after Confederation, Canada’s farmers grew [22 million bushels](#) of wheat. In 1891, when a third of the labour force was on the farm, the harvest was 61 million bushels. In 1905, the year Alberta and Saskatchewan became provinces, it was 107 million bushels.

Two years later, [Sir Charles Edward Saunders](#) began testing a new variety of wheat, developed by cross-breeding Red Fife with fast-growing Hard Red

Calcutta from India. The new variety, Marquis, was ideal for Canada's short summer. In 1911, Canadian farmers harvested more than 200 million bushels of wheat. In 1915, the figure was nearly 400 million.

Over the following century, as the farm labour force fell, farm output rose. The 1940 wheat crop was 540 million bushels. A new peak of 702 million bushels was hit in 1952. The year before the Centennial, the harvest was 827 million bushels.

And in 2023, not a record year, Canada's ever-shrinking number of farmers produced [32 million tonnes](#) of wheat – nearly 1.2 billion bushels.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-canada-is-about-to-lose-more-than-100000-farming-jobs-thats-great/>

With people like Tony Keller as “thought leaders” with especial prominence in public forums, no wonder we are in the hopeless mess we are in, with civilizational decline and eventual ecological destruction being the outcome no matter how much “economic growth” is extracted from our national resources.

“Cheap food” has paved the way for greater wealth to be obtained by leaving more “discretionary income” to be siphoned off for all sorts of frivolous consumer spending in a spiral that never stops bleeding people broke. No wonder “rural” people have no use for their “urban” so-called country mates.

No one cares to ask all those displaced farm people if they really want to be off the land and forced to toil in the bowels of the corporate industrial structure. In farming country where small and medium farmers are steadily being eliminated, with two monster multinational potash companies claiming them and their offspring, we hear constantly how much most of these “losers” in the farming game hate corporate work, no matter how high the wages. Increasingly “working at the mine” has become a detested endurance test putting up with hollow platitudes with the herded and manipulated left feeling full well that the place only exists and operates to generate profits and dividends to satisfy investors. “This used to be a good place to work—It might have felt like prison sometimes, but they still let you go home at night—but now it is just a paycheque for work that leaves me depressed.” It rankles more and more with old farm boys who have tasted a different way of life, of making a living.

Farm work was once often dangerous, back-breaking labor, and good riddance to most, if not all, of that. But to maintain that the current approach to agriculture is the legitimate and only route to progress is disgustingly disingenuous. Things could have been improved much differently, and we would now have a better quality of person farming, more farm families, healthier rural communities, sustainable practices, and a better country. TJB