

# Perceptions of Careers in Agriculture

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Today's agricultural sector is vastly changed since that of even a few generations ago, yet there is concern that many Albertans still envision agriculture and its various occupations through a distant and dated lens. The farming landscape is changing and agriculture is now part of a larger agrifood value chain that is also changing. Workforce demands have evolved, as diverse occupational categories become increasingly integrated into the sector from technical experts, to researchers, to quality control specialists. Today's agricultural labour force has expanded beyond the role of the farm hand or heavy machine operator.

The purpose of this report is to establish an understanding of what Albertans' perceptions of agricultural occupations generally are. In order to accomplish this, some fundamental questions require answering:

- How do Albertans rate their own knowledge of the agriculture industry?
- How do Albertans perceive recent agricultural labour force demand?
- What perceived benefits and drawbacks are there to careers in agriculture?
- What are Albertans' assumptions about agricultural work?
- What occupations are Albertans most likely to associate with agriculture?

How do different demographics and other personal characteristics affect responses to the above?

### Key Findings

A summary of key findings from the analysis is provided here:

- One quarter of survey participants have worked in agriculture, and another 12% of respondents currently work in agriculture or food processing
- 47% of people self-identify as having a low level of knowledge of the agriculture industry and another 40% have a moderate level. Only 13% of respondents claim to have a high level of knowledge about the agriculture industry
  - Knowledge is lowest among people under 45 years of age, representing a possible source of misperception in understandings about agricultural occupations
- 14% of respondents identified simply needing a job or a lack of alternative options as a reason that would attract them to the sector, making it the highest single reason. The results indicate that a factor in directing people toward a career in agriculture may be a lack of alternative career options or the immediacy of employment needs
- Top benefits to a career in agriculture listed by participants include being one's own boss (30% of responses), good job opportunities (13% of responses) and feeding the population (12% of responses). Only 8% of people indicated good pay
  - The benefit of being one's own boss was viewed most prominently by people that have worked in agriculture previously, compared to other response groups
- 22% of respondents identify climate as a drawback of a career in agriculture, 21% indicate low salary to be an issue, and 18% identify that it is too expensive. Given the margin of error (+/- 3.99), the

seniority of any of the above cannot be wholly confirmed; therefore, they must all be viewed as equally important when generalizing to the broader population

- There is a gap in perceptions about salaries in the agriculture sector, with people under 45 being significantly less concerned about salaries in the sector than older age groups
  - Those with a strong knowledge of the sector most commonly noted careers in agriculture as being too expensive
  - Those with moderate knowledge most commonly noted careers in agriculture as having low salaries
  - Those with low levels of knowledge most commonly noted careers are dependent on climate
- Over 60% of people believe job demand in the agriculture sector has either remained the same over the last five years or declined
    - Females are less likely to believe demand has increased than males (males = 22%, females = 11%)
  - People that have moderate to high knowledge of agriculture are more likely to indicate the job market has grown over the last five years, whereas those with low knowledge are more likely to identify the job market has remained the same over the same period
  - People most commonly characterize agricultural work as being physically demanding (89% of responses), high skill (64% of responses), and poorly paid (58% of responses). Importantly, these results indicate key perceptions representative of the majority of Albertans, however, more specifically:
    - Women are more likely than men to identify agricultural work as physically demanding (males = 84%; females = 95%)
    - Nearly 20% more women (75%) estimated that agricultural work is a high skill occupation than men (57%)
  - Only 20% of Albertans agree that people in agriculture typically have higher levels of education, yet 64% believe such careers to be of high skill rather than low skill
  - The older Albertans are, the more likely they will agree that there is a wide variety of jobs in agriculture. Specifically, 67% of respondents over 65 years of age agree or strongly agree that there is a wide variety of job types compared to 51% of respondents under 45, and 59% of respondents 45-64 years old
  - Overall, most Albertans do not view agriculture as requiring higher levels of education; however, 36% of respondents over 65 years of age agree or strongly agree that individuals wanting a career in the agricultural industry have higher education levels compared to 16% of respondents under 45, and 20% of respondents 45-64 years old. The older Albertans are, the more likely they are to believe that a career in agriculture requires higher education levels
  - 29% of respondents under 45 years old agree or strongly agree that agricultural jobs are generally well paid compared to 13% of 45 to 64 year olds, and 15% of respondents over 65. Moreover, 12% of men strongly agree compared to 1% of women
  - 13% of respondents over 65 strongly disagree that there are a lot of employment opportunities within Alberta's agricultural sector compared to 3% of those under 45, and 7% of respondents 45 to 64 years old

When stakeholders were asked what jobs came to mind when they thought about the agriculture sector, they most commonly listed the following:

- Farm (unspecified) (45% of respondents)
- Labourer Worker / Farm Hand (37% of respondents)
- Transportation / Delivery / Drivers (12% of respondents)
- Sales (9% of respondents)
- Mechanical Operator / Heavy Machine Operator (9% of respondents)
- Cattle Beef (9% of respondents)

The results illustrate a cut point between a large proportion of people offering generic occupations, and a drastically smaller proportion articulating specific roles that go beyond the preliminary image of a farmer or labourer.

## Conclusion

While there is a benefit to understanding what general perceptions exist (as elaborated on above), there is also a need to unpack what their implications may be.

At the outset of this report several key research questions were presented which guided the survey process. This discussion revisits the results and their implications in light of these questions:

- How do Albertans rate their own knowledge of the agriculture industry?
- How do Albertans perceive recent agricultural labour force demand?
- What perceived benefits and drawbacks are there to careers in agriculture?
- What are Albertans' assumptions about agricultural work?
- What occupations are Albertans most likely to associate with agriculture?
- How do different demographics and other personal characteristics affect responses to the above questions?

In regard to the questions above, the following observations can be gleaned from the survey findings:

- The majority of Albertans have moderate to low perceived levels of knowledge about the agricultural industry. Generally, people with low levels of knowledge are least likely to believe there are many employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. Whether there are many employment opportunities or not, low levels of knowledge result in speculations rather than informed decisions. Self-identified levels of knowledge were lowest among people 45 and younger, which is the age demographic most likely to be targeted for labour force recruitment in the sector. If knowledge levels are low, it follows that initiatives designed to educate the Alberta population are best targeted at this age demographic.
- Relatedly, a need to educate younger portions of the population (aged 45 and under) has been identified regarding the diversity of agricultural career occupations. Specifically, this age group is least likely to agree that there is a wide variety of jobs in the sector, overlooking possible areas that exist outside of the traditional farmer stereotype. If young adults are more likely to be unaware of career opportunities, the labour force may be strained; signalling a need to educate the demographic about opportunities across the sector and adjust communications methods. This may require further enhancement of the relationships between the Province, post-secondary institutions and agriculture-related associations.
- Albertans largely believe agricultural work is not well paid and that it does not require high education levels. People may attribute a causal relationship between low education level requirements and low pay. Given that the majority of survey respondents estimate their knowledge of the industry to be

moderate to low, there may be misperceptions about income and education levels in the sector. The findings indicate a need to ground-truth people's perceptions about levels of education and salaries in order to see if presumptions are correct.

- Labour force demand in agriculture is viewed most commonly as having remained the same or being in decline, which matches some outlooks provided by Alberta Learning Information Services for specific occupations (see **Figure 2**). Furthermore, survey findings indicate that Albertans generally have low levels of agreement that there are many employment opportunities in agriculture. Meanwhile, news reports point toward perceived shortages in labour.<sup>[1]</sup> Taken collectively, the findings highlight a potential gap, either in Albertan's perceptions, or in current labour force demand information. There are resources that can monitor workforce demand, such as Vicinity the Job Demand Reporting System (Vicinity Jobs), which may aid in clarifying particular occupational demand.<sup>[2]</sup>
- Albertans that currently work in the sector are more likely to see positive benefits regarding opportunity, diversity of employment, and good pay, than people working in other sectors indicating a knowledge gap between those in the industry and those outside of it. While people already familiar with the sector are not a key focal target for labour force recruitment and planning, there may be opportunities to ensure they remain within the sector and have opportunities for professional improvement and upward mobility.

## Recommendations

Given the results discussed above, it is worthwhile to take stock of how they can be directed into opportunities for future planning and problem solving. The following recommendations have emerged, based on research and survey findings. Key recommendations include:

### Evidence-Based Career Awareness

- Work with Industry to develop a career awareness campaign that is grounded in facts and exposes myths, to increase the level of knowledge in the general population about the agricultural sector, its scope, and the many occupations affiliated with it.
- Target awareness building resources and communications most directly at the below 45 age group, where knowledge levels are currently lowest and where workforce attraction will likely be highest.
- Identify opportunities to promote mentorship relationships between people considering careers in agriculture and people already active in the sector or occupation being considered (in collaboration with education institutions and associations).
- Target high schools through hands-on, interactive career fairs, and relevant information resources to increase youth awareness of a career in agriculture.
- Create Information Fact Sheets that dispel the many misconceptions. Topics should include wages, climate, impact (feeding the population), environmental considerations, etc.

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<sup>[1]</sup> See for example: Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council, "Agriculture and Agri-food Tackle Ag-Labour Shortages," 2015-06-09: <http://www.cahrc-crrha.ca/node/2216>; Mazier, Dan., "Labour Shortage Should be Addressed," The Western Producer, 2015-10-08: <http://www.producer.com/2015/10/labour-shortage-should-be-addressed/>.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Vicinity Jobs: <http://www.vicinityjobs.com/>

## **Partnerships and Collaboration**

- Enhance interrelationships between Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Labour, education institutions, and agricultural associations to work collaboratively at addressing the following issues:
  - Increasing awareness of occupational choices in the sector
  - Identifying industry averages for salaries in different agricultural occupations and their competitiveness to other sectors
  - Identify industry skill and education requirements for different occupations and possible discrepancies between perceived requirements and actual ones
  - Identify existing resources that may reduce anxiety over perceived risks associated with agricultural careers and ensure mechanisms are in place to direct people toward helpful information
- Work with industry associations to investigate opportunities and barriers to succession planning in agriculture. Create opportunities for businesses to explore succession planning strategies, including potential to link interested buyers with interested sellers.
- Showcase women in the sector who have achieved career success, as a means of promoting increased participation of females. Work closely with industry associations to identify opportunities to better inform and connect with target demographics

## **Labour Market Information**

- Implement a real-time labour force demand monitoring protocol such as that afforded by Vicinity Jobs, in order to understand areas of current demand and to track local trends
- Develop projections to understand which subsectors and occupations are most likely to require targeting for workforce recruitment in the future.