

# Farm builders asked about engaging more apprentices

Making it easier to get people into trades is one of Skilled Trades Ontario's goals

**BY LISA BOONSTOPPEL**  
*Ontario Farmer*

In a crowd of over 50 farm builders, only a few raised their hand when asked how many were training apprentices.

"I see less than six hands and I would really like to motivate you today so that there will be more than six," said Michael Sherrard, speaking at the Canadian Farm Builders Association annual conference held April 23 in Stratford.

Sherrard is an employment and labour lawyer, and Chair of Skilled Trades Ontario, an agency of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development responsible for apprenticeship and skilled trades certification.

With a goal to get more companies to train the next generation of tradespeople, Sherrard was curious what stops farm builders and other trade leaders from engaging apprentices.

He explained that the government created Skilled Trades Ontario to modernize and streamline Ontario's skilled trades and apprenticeship system to help address the province's labour shortage.



**Michael Sherrard: "I have an order for over 30,000 people"**

"Currently, there are 144 skilled trades recognized in Ontario," explained Sherrard. "One in five jobs in the province are in skilled trades and right now, and one in three journeypersons are over the age of 55." Construction labour forecasts predict the construction sector will require 120,000 workers in the next decade due to retirement and growth increase in the industry. However, only 88,000 workers are expected to join the workforce to fill those positions. "I have an order for over 30,000 people," Sherrard said.

Of the active apprentices in the province right now, approximately 53,000 are in construction. Skilled Trades Ontario issued over 10,000 Certificates of Qualification in 2023, of which nearly 6,000 were in construction trades. So far this year, they have issued approximately 2,300 certificates in the

construction sector.

One of the ways to attract those extra workers to the trades is recognizing these are lifetime careers with diverse opportunities. "I know tonnes of journeypersons who went into the trades and now run their own businesses," said Sherrard. His goal is to encourage high schools, companies, and tradespeople to help students enter a trade, learn a skill, and know they have a lifetime job if they want it.

Part of Skilled Trades Ontario's work is to make this process more streamlined. One of its responsibilities is to establish apprenticeship training and curriculum standards and get existing ones up to date. "We also need to assess the criteria for experienced workers who haven't completed an Ontario apprenticeship, but are looking to get into our skilled trades. We do this through the Trade

Equivalency Process...a system to assess applicants' skills and work experience."

Once a student finishes their apprenticeship, they can go for the next level of certification if their trade has a certifying exam. Once they pass their trade's certifying exam, Skilled Trades Ontario will issue a Certification of Qualification. Skilled Trades Ontario maintains a public register of individuals who hold certificates in compulsory trades.

Skilled Trades Ontario is also conducting its own research. "We are really trying to become a hub for research because you can make good decisions when you have good evidence in front of you," said Sherrard.

The team at Skilled Trades Ontario attends career fairs and Sherrard believes that is very important. For some youth whose parents are not in trades, these fairs could be the first time they are exposed to the idea of pursuing a job in the trades. This work complements the specialized high school job skills programs that also help students enter careers in the trades.

Another one of Skilled Trades Ontario's goals is to encourage more female students to consider the trades. Sherrard encouraged leaders in the farm building industry to be welcoming to all genders.

Building a diverse, equitable and inclusive skilled trades sec-

tor is one of four priorities outlined in Skilled Trades Ontario's inaugural strategic plan. The agency's other three focus areas are: supporting an innovative apprenticeship and certification model, promoting and advancing the skilled trades, and facilitating research in the skilled trades.

Harmonization with other provinces is another part of Skilled Trades Ontario's work. Sherrard said harmonization makes sense because if one area of Canada is booming, it would be great if students' training can match what another province offers.

This idea was met with some concern during question period with one attendee saying construction is booming in Ontario right now, so the province needs to keep its skilled labour. It's not the right time to focus on harmonization, the attendee said.

Sherrard explained that harmonization means companies in Ontario could attract apprentices from other provinces. Harmonization has actually been a goal for over a decade but is really gaining traction now, Sherrard added.

He encouraged everyone to visit Skilled Trades Ontario's website to see all that is offered online, before signing off with a challenge: "If everyone in this room engages just one apprentice, we will be so much further ahead!"

# Technology may help B.C. farmers with dry weather

Disruptive weather may be a main reason about one per cent of B.C. farmers are throwing in the towel each year

**BY BRIANNA CHARLEBOIS**  
*The Canadian Press*

B.C. grain farmer Malcolm Odermatt says all he can do is pray for rain this spring after repeated droughts sabotaged his harvest last year.

Odermatt, who is also the president of the B.C. Grain Growers Association, has been working with his father since 2012 to farm about 800 hectares of land - just under a square kilometre - in the Peace region of B.C.'s northeast. He said seeding typically begins in May and although he's worried, he hasn't yet lost hope the weather will turn around.

"We're in a Class 5 drought, the highest classification you can get actually, and we've had low rainfall and not a lot of snow," said Odermatt, who grows wheat, barley, oats, canola and grasses for seed production.

"We rely on run-off in the springtime, like the snowmelt, to actually replenish our soil moisture and we just haven't had that for a couple of years."

Farmers in B.C. and beyond and industry analysts say dramatic swings in weather are hampering grain and other crop yields at a time when farmers are leaving the sector, and the only way forward is to adapt with technology.

Lenore Newman, director of the Food and Agriculture Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, said many in Western Canada have an "Old MacDonald image" of farming

that is no longer realistic or sustainable.

"It's a giant, technologically advanced industry and it needs to be treated as such ... because the truth is Old MacDonald doesn't have a farm. He went broke in the '80s," she said.

"If farmers are going to beat constant climate disruptions to grow food, they're going to need all the technology available and a lot more that hasn't been invented yet."

Newman said research and funding into such agricultural advancements should fall to the government.

The federal Ministry of Agriculture said in a statement that it "is investing in climate change research and targeted initiatives to support farmers and the agricultural sector."

Among such investments is Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Strategic Plan for Sci-

ence, which allocated \$855.7 million to go toward science, research and development in 2024-25. However, Newman said the programs are a "patchwork quilt" of resources that don't meet all research and development needs.

"The AAFC runs amazing programs but a lot of it is organized toward industries, not core research and development the way the funding bodies are (in other sectors)," she said.

"If you're a researcher, there's nowhere you can apply to get that core funding to develop a deep, long-term set of research."

Newman said disruptive weather may be a main reason about one per cent of B.C. farmers are throwing in the towel each year, something she called a "quiet crisis." "B.C. is really vulnerable because the farms are so small, and the farmers tend to be smaller producers,"

she said, comparing B.C. and Prairie operations.

Swinging weather conditions have already devastated the wine crop in the Okanagan as well as cherries and peaches. Newman said that luckily for grain farmers, their product isn't as vulnerable as fruit and vegetables.

"We're a grain and pulse powerhouse, so if we started having problems there, that's terrible for us," she said.

Odermatt said the Peace region, which hosts more than 90 per cent of grain farmers in the province, has experienced "a whole pile of terrible weather events" in recent years.

He remains optimistic despite the current drought.

"Maybe suddenly the taps will turn on and we'll get caught up on all the moisture we've missed out on for the past year."