

Their diversity solution

Is there a better way to find and retain farm employees in Canada's tough market? Alberta's Van Raay Paskal Farms figured there must be, with innovative thinking and a readiness to look to non-traditional sources

BY LORRAINE STEVENSON / CG ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The sun is barely up but VRP Farms Ltd., a half hour north of Lethbridge, is already humming. Pen riders saddle their horses and barn labourers are shipping, sorting and processing. Feed drivers put their trucks in gear, operators of high hoes and manure trucks shuttle about the site, and truck drivers back up to the chutes to begin loading cattle.

At the farm shop in nearby Iron Springs, welders and mechanics have started their daily rounds too, fixing, repairing and maintaining the farm's extensive machinery, mills and other infrastructure.

The initials of VRP Farms represent its two founding Alberta families — the Van Raays and the Paskals — who amalgamated their cropland and feedlots in 2015.

Needless to say, a farm operation of this size and complexity has plenty of work around the clock to do, and many pairs of hands are needed to get it done. This past autumn VRP Farms had 201 employees on its payroll.

"We have capacity of 150,000 head of cattle with those feedlots and we grow practically all our own silage, so we have a lot of crewing to do," says Jolayne Farn, VRP Farms' human resource manager.

You'll find Farn in the office most days, but she's also regularly out at the jobsites, supporting employee HR reviews, safety programs, company loyalty programs, and employee training and mentoring. Her job is planning, co-ordinating, and directing the recruitment, interviewing and hiring of VRP Farms' crews.

She's always looking for the right match to fill the open positions. It's a big job in the best of circumstances, and as any farm owner

trying to hire pretty well anywhere in Canada knows, it's also a tough one.

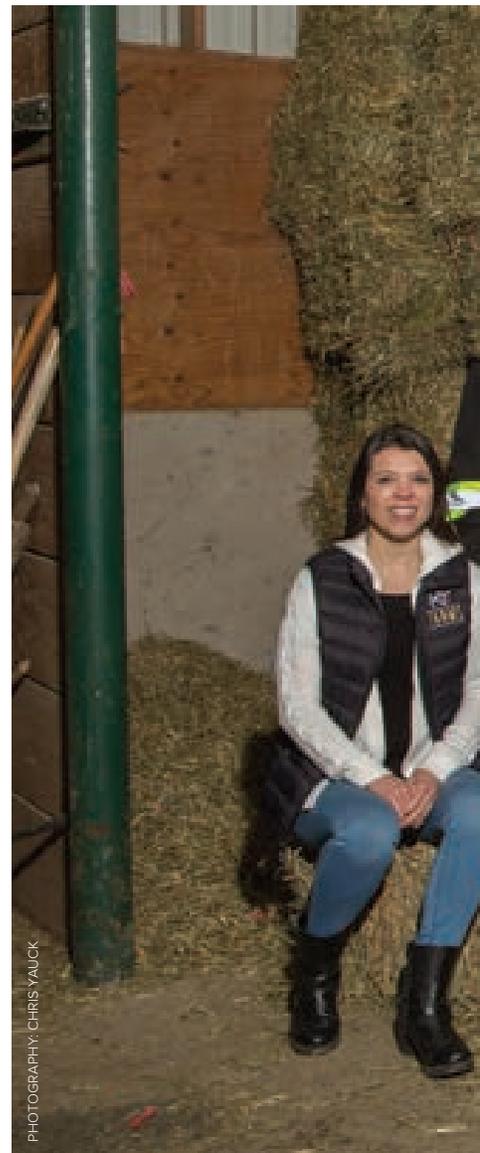
VRP Farms feels the pinch of this country's acute agricultural labour shortage just like anyone else. Farn regularly posts openings for positions such as feed truck drivers, labourers, pen riders and farm equipment operators, and she uses every possible venue to get that word out, from social media posting to Indeed.com, Kijiji, radio and newspaper ads, and an internal "hire pay" program, where staff are paid bonuses if they refer new employees. Farn also attends as many career fairs as possible and as far away as Vermillion and Olds.

It can be a waiting game. There are positions she's tried to continually fill.

"I have had a lot of postings out for an agricultural heavy equipment technician," she tells *Country Guide*. "I cannot find one anywhere."

All this will sound familiar to anyone who has similarly tried, without success, to attract candidates with the skills they need in times when it can seem there are near-extinction levels of interest or know-how for working on a Canadian farm.

Except... VRP Farms has, in fact, developed ways to navigate the labour shortage, and with foresight and strategies developed over the years, has had notable success with recruiting, hiring and retaining hundreds of employees, with many staying on for years and building careers with the company. VRP Farms' commitment to their on-the-job training and skills development, was highlighted in 2016 in research completed by the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) as example of a farm business's successful workforce retention.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS YAUCK

VRP Farms Ltd. is proud of its farm team made up of people hired both locally and internationally. Staff pictured here, who represent a range of jobs on the farm, come from Canada as well as Mexico, France and the U.K.

“We pride ourselves on diversity,” says VRP’s HR manager Jolayne Farn. In 2020, 70 per cent of new hires came from outside Canada



Canadian pen rider Ethan Campbell also helps train new pen riders the company hires.

THE NEW STRATEGY

Farn spoke to *Country Guide* late last fall, describing how their approaches have worked to attract and retain a large farm team comprised of both Canadian-born workers and those hired through the Temporary Foreign Worker program.

They've recruited from a variety of under-represented populations, including Mexicans, Mexican Mennonites, and First Nations, as well as workers from Eastern Canada and the Maritimes. But because they cannot attract enough workers from within Canada, they also extensively use the Temporary Foreign Worker program for workers with a long-term outlook. In 2020 approximately 70 per cent of VRP Farms' team was hired from outside Canada.

"We've recruited from Mexico, South Africa, Russia, Ukraine, Chile, Guatemala, Germany and United Kingdom," said Farn.

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“We pride ourselves in diversity. We’re very strong with that.”

Most telling of the company’s successes with their hiring and retention strategies is the longevity of many of their employees, and the number who have also advanced into higher level managerial positions.

There’s a core value at work here. VRP Farms wants employees who will commit to learning their job and to taking on more responsibility as new opportunities become available, Farn said. That’s because they’re prepared to invest in significant training of all their workers, and they work hard at screening applicants so they’re confident they’re hiring those looking for those opportunities, not merely a job.

“We want long-term people,” Farn said. Experience is an asset, of course, but with so many not having much farm or feedlot experience nowadays, the farm is willing to train the right people.

“I tell people when I’m interviewing that if they do have some experience great, but if they don’t that’s okay. We’re willing to train people that are green and have the right attitude, the can-do attitude.”

And they most certainly do. A clearly written job description, a thorough new employee orientation, and extensive on-the-job training that includes a review of safe working procedures are part of VRP Farms’ standard employment package.

In return, the expectation is that those they hire genuinely want the job, and show interest in further opportunities as they develop. She can usually judge if that’s the case by how applicants answer one simple question.

“If I ask someone ‘Why did you apply’ and they say ‘I just need a job,’ they’re probably not going to work here, and I say that respectfully,” she said. “We want someone who wants a career in this industry. Our foremen and managers spend a lot of time training, working and creating a strong team environment. We want people who feel accomplished at the end of the day.”

NEW HORIZONS

Those they bring to Canada through the federal Temporary Foreign Worker program are just as diligently selected for preparedness to commit to the job — and to moving to Canada, of course.

That’s worked out very well for VRP Farms, with many of their temporary for-



Human resource manager at VRP Farms Jolayne Farn and her HR assistant Lizza Cruz, who is originally from Mexico, work as a team in the office.

eign workers finding a good fit with the jobs they were hired for, and advancing through the years into management positions they hold today. They have several staff members who began working here as barn labourers, moved on to become pen riders as their skills in cattle handling, animal disease recognition and other areas increased, and eventually into management positions.

“All eight foremen that we have in our eight feedlots have grown through the company, and our assistant foremen too.”

The initial match between the farm and their Mexican workers began with a conversation struck up between VRP Farms’ president Rick Paskal and Cristo Hurtado, today general manager of the feedlots. Paskal met him while in Mexico and the two men began talking about agriculture and commonalities between their two countries. Hurtado was offered a job as a pen rider in one of the feedlots at VRP Farms, which he accepted, and arrangements were made through the Temporary Foreign Worker program for him to come here.

That was 13 years ago. Hurtado, worked his way into his present-day position and has since referred many more successful employ-

Barn labourer Daniel Todd, who’d never worked in a feedlot before, is a local man hired for his positive attitude and eagerness to work and learn on the job.

“While they’re learning their jobs, we’re learning from them,” Farn says. “It’s about everyone listening.”

eers from Mexico who’ve also seized the chance to come to Canada, worked hard at jobs they were offered, and ultimately built careers and futures for their families here.

It’s no small feat to uproot one’s family and set forth to work in another country. VRP Farms understands that and has worked hard to ease the settlement process for workers accepting job offers from overseas. Services they offer include finding suitable housing arranged through carefully selected rental homes in the region, and offers of repayable loans to cover initial settlement costs such as purchases of vehicles and furniture. There are also unique expenses for some of their employees: pen riders, for instance, need a good reliable horse for their job. VRP Farms offers help by loaning the employee money to cover that cost, too.

As well there are Spanish translators on site to aid in smooth communication, and the company also hires English-as-a-Second Language teachers to help those needing to boost their language skills. That’s fundamentally important for non-native English speakers, of course, but the classes are open to all and others also take them to boost language proficiency, notes Farn. Communication

tends to be the most complicating factor when managing a multi-cultural workforce, she adds. There can be times when language barriers result in misunderstandings that need to be cleared up.

The company is very proud of their diverse workforce, and most certainly benefits from the broad range of perspectives and ideas its mix of workers from Canada and the rest of the world bring to their work. Knowledge-sharing is a core company value, says Farn, adding all workers are encouraged to share their knowledge and ideas brought from elsewhere in the world.

“While they’re learning at their jobs, we’re learning from them,” she said. “Other people have great ideas. It’s about everyone listening and thinking about those ideas.”

BEYOND THE FARM

There’s another core benefit to a workplace such as VRP Farms and it extends well beyond the boundaries of the business. Bringing new Canadians to the region is helping diversify and grow the rural population in the region, too. Spanish and other languages are now heard often around Picture Butte today.

“Some of our employees’ wives are now teacher’s aides at the school because they’re bilingual,” adds Farn.

Her assistant Lizza Cruz is originally from Mexico, and Cruz and her husband Armando Macias exemplify the kinds of families VRP Farms is bringing to Canada. The couple came here as temporary foreign workers 12 years ago. Macias started work here as a pen rider while VRP Farms assisted the young couple, who’d brought their three-month-old baby with them, to pursue their pathway to permanent residency in Canada. The couple have since become Canadian citizens. Today Macias is the company’s quality control manager while Cruz, now a fluent English speaker, works with Farn as her HR assistant supporting all aspects of delivery of their human resources program.

“It was very hard to move here by ourselves without family and with a very little girl, but we were happy and we were very excited to move and start this new life here,” said Cruz.

Cruz and Macias’s reference came from Hurtado, the first worker from Mexico hired to work here, and they represent the first of many excellent employees who subsequently joined VRP Farms.

“That (referral program) has been very successful for us,” adds Farn.

Yet, even after they’ve done all these things, they never do fill every job vacancy. That’s just the reality faced by agricultural employers of all sizes. Canada faces a 63,000 job deficit, on track to hit 123,000 in a decade. RBC’s *Farmer 4.0* report, (see sidebar) calls for a national skills strategy to restock the agricultural workforce. Notably, it also points to the role immigrants and new Canadians will play in that; they now represent one in fourteen of the agricultural population, compared with one in five of all Canadians.

“VRP values its Canadian-born and foreign-born workers in equal measure,” said Farn. Still, she said, “We need the Temporary Foreign Worker program. It is essential to the agricultural industry.” **CG**

The challenge grows

There’s only so much any one farm can do in light of the problem Canadian agriculture has with an insufficient and unstable labour supply.

The labour gap currently sits at 63,000 but is on track to reach 123,000 by 2029, according to the Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council (CAHRC).

Their research shows primary agriculture also brought in over 60,000 temporary foreign workers in 2019, yet still faced 16,000 vacancies.

It all adds up to farmers having the highest vacancy rate of any industry at 5.4 per cent in 2017.

Almost every province gets part of its ag workforce from off-shore, although numbers vary. Alberta, for example, has relatively few foreign workers — just 2,355 in 2017 — compared to the 54,500 employed in agriculture-related work there.

In Ontario’s much larger agricultural workforce of 97,800 workers, nearly 30 per cent are foreign workers, employed mostly in that province’s horticultural sector.

All of this is happening against a backdrop of rural depopulation; Canada is now a country where 25 million now live in cities, compared to the six million in rural Canada, and we’ve produced a generation of Canadians whose lack of knowledge about the farm is matched only by their dislike of manual labour.

That was brought home when farmers couldn’t hire enough people during the early days of the pandemic, even as record numbers of unemployed Canadians were receiving emergency government financial aid.

It underscored not only how structurally dependent agriculture has become on international workers, but the urgent need to find solutions to farming’s labour shortage.

There are lots of ideas on the table to fix this intractable problem, including streamlining the Temporary Foreign Worker program while improving immigration options for those wanting to remain in Canada.

Other ways forward include making strategic investments in education to attract more domestic workers back into agriculture, and more investments in the commercialization of labour-saving technologies and automation.

The 2019 report by RBC, *Farmer 4.0: How the Coming Skills Revolution can Transform Agriculture* zeros in on agriculture’s need for workers with divergent skills in five specific categories: deciders, enablers, specialists, advisors and doers, the latter category representing farm labourers, where the most acute shortages exist in the short term.

“The nation is at a critical moment where the agricultural workforce can be restocked with future-focused, productivity-enhancing skills,” says *Farmer 4.0*.

However, to get there, “we need to rethink our approach to education, both for agriculture and the growing range of sectors that affect it; do more to attract young people to farming, and invest in the skills needed to attract a growing immigrant population to the sector,” it also says.

Notably, farmers themselves will soon be harder to find, too.

“By the mid-2020s, the industry will begin to descend a retirement cliff,” the report says, citing how one in every four will be reaching age 65 or older by 2025, and creating a situation where “the number of deciders is shrinking faster than the demand for their entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen.”