



#### CASW Safety Advice Article #4

**Headline: Overcoming Language and Cultural Barriers with Seasonal Migrant Farm Workers**

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**Word Count: 834**

Ever feel like your instructions are lost in translation? If you employ seasonal migrant workers on your farm, cultural differences, language proficiency, and literacy can make communicating health and safety requirements seem like climbing a mountain. But as a farm operator, there are strategies you can employ to help ensure the safety and well-being of your workers, whether they live in the next town over or overseas.

The first step is to recognize that there are cultural differences at play. For example, safety standards, such as the Right to Refuse Unsafe Work, may not exist in their country. Some of your workers might not understand the need for safety precautions, or may view safety steps as optional or a waste of time. So communicate and enforce health and safety requirements, and make it clear that health and safety practices are a condition of employment.

Some male migrant workers may be reluctant to take direction from female supervisors, or may feel it is okay to make comments about a woman's physical appearance that may not be appropriate in a Canadian workplace. Make it clear that workers are to treat female employees with respect, and are to follow instructions from female supervisors without incident.

As an operator, you assign job responsibilities based on an individual's experience and capabilities. Be aware that migrant workers may establish an internal "pecking order" that is at odds with your existing supervisory relationships. Certain individuals may try to use language skills to increase their status. However, they may misinterpret instructions, putting your workers at risk of injury. Do not allow supervisors to use migrant peers as interpreters. And take the time to define who is in charge and who will be giving directions.

Many migrant workers may be tempted to burn themselves out or moonlight with another operation to send more money home to their families. And yet, provincial labour regulations may require you to limit their hours of work. Explain what the limits are, why they are in place, the importance of breaks, and how working tired increases the risk of injury and should be avoided.

Few people like to admit that they've made a mistake or don't understand something. Migrant workers may be even more embarrassed by this out of fear they will be "sent home." Make it clear that it is okay if your workers don't understand and require further clarification. Observe their work and provide constructive feedback in a non-threatening way until you are confident they can perform the task appropriately.

Think of a time when you were in another country. How relieved were you when you found someone who understood just enough English or French to help you out? Don't get frustrated or raise your voice. Migrant workers aren't hearing impaired. Speak slowly, simply and politely, avoid slang and jargon, learn key phrases in their language, use exaggerated body language to convey information, and identify or hire a staff person who can speak their language fluently.

While we might take it for granted that most people can read and write, this isn't necessarily the case. Not only may your workers be unable to understand instructions in your language, but they may also be unable to understand instructions in their own language. Even if your instructions are translated, they may not be understood due to variations in dialect. And yet, in many jurisdictions across Canada, regulatory standards require



employers to ensure that specific health and safety documentation—such as Material Safety Data Sheets, labels and signage—is accessible to all workers. So integrate the use of pictures, demonstrations, short video clips or other visual techniques into your safety instructions and determine if written safety information is available in other languages. And make sure a staff member is available to interpret that information for workers who need it.

Migrant workers provide a vital service to Canadian farmers. At the same time, farmers provide migrant workers with economic opportunities that they might not have access to in their own countries. Take time to research the language and culture of your migrant workers. Show respect for their culture and encourage employees of different backgrounds to interact and get to know each other better. Improving cross-cultural understanding not only strengthens relationships between employers and workers, but it also helps to ensure the health and safety of everyone who works or lives on the farm.

*For more information on Overcoming Language and Cultural Barriers with Seasonal Migrant Farm Workers, visit [agsafetyweek.ca/producer-tools](http://agsafetyweek.ca/producer-tools) and browse through over 20 free resources designed to help producers make their farms safer. This article was produced in support of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Week 2014 Let's Talk About It! campaign, which encourages farmers to engage in conversations about safety. CASW is brought to you by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, with support from the Government of Canada through Growing Forward 2, long-time corporate sponsor Farm Credit Canada, Ag for Life, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, CHS, Imperial Oil and Pioneer Hi-Bred Limited.*

