

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: COVID-19 Impact - Seasonal Agricultural Workers Missing in
Czech Agriculture

Country: Czech Republic

Post: Prague

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Report Highlights:

In the Czech Republic, this year's vegetable harvest will require approximately 4,000 additional seasonal workers; fruit growers will need more than 10,000 workers. A significant numbers of these workers can be sourced locally, however, it will necessitate temporary changes to the Czech labor law pertaining to the temporary contract work.

Like in many other European Member States, the traditional seasonal workers are missing in Czech agriculture because of the closed borders and other anti-COVID-19 measures. Now it is an issue mainly for vegetable producers. Some vegetable producers are still uncertain, when, if, and/or how much they will be able to harvest this year

Czech farmers grow vegetables on 11 thousand hectares. Generally, domestic production covers one-third of domestic vegetable consumption. Over 600 thousand MT of vegetables are imported, mostly from Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland.

But the situation is not hopeless and is overall less critical when compared to Italy or Spain for instance. It varies among different regions and individual companies, with some producers able to recruit volunteers or find other substitute workers.

Positive developments were reported by the Czech Hop Growers Union and asparagus producers. Hop growers were able to secure locally 1,500 - 2,000 seasonal workers, which according to the Union representative, is a sufficient amount for the necessary work of attaching the hop plants to the trellises. The seasonal workers consist mainly of the automotive industry workers, that were released after the local Skoda factory (and others) interrupted their operations. There have been about 3,000 of these workers available. Additionally, the hop and asparagus growers were able to hire some unexpected volunteers among those, who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 crises including actors, technicians from the music industry, retirees, and some students. Asparagus growers were able to harvest most of their production, however, the record crop they had expected this year did not materialize due to losses connected to delays in harvest and untrained labor.

Various agricultural associations and unions have been instrumental in helping their members to find seasonal workers. The Ministry of Agriculture called on agricultural universities for student volunteers and the mutual cooperation resulted in a website called AgroWork (Agroprace.cz), where agrarian companies and farms seek volunteers and volunteers seek jobs in agriculture. It is not limited only to the students. The private labor agencies are active as well.

When the state of emergency was declared, on March 13, all foreign workers' visas (of those, who were here legally), were automatically extended until the end of the state of emergency. Labor offices were instructed to issue new work permits to those foreign workers immediately. Those, who arrived already in February and beginning of March were able to do some agricultural machinery maintenance and plant vegetables. Government also issued a special resolution that made providing accommodation to the foreigners with a valid work permit exempt from the ban on providing accommodation.

Vegetable growers will need approximately 1,500 seasonal workers in April and additional 3,000 to 5,000 for harvest in May/June and in October/November. A similar situation is anticipated later on for Czech fruit growers. Growers had contracted for more than ten thousand workers for this season, who now cannot arrive to the Czech Republic. Forest workers are needed as well, to help with recovery from the bark beetle outbreak.

Vegetable growers fear for the second half of April, because many of those seasonal workers who arrived in February or beginning of March are scheduled to leave around Easter time. While it is possible to source some temporary workers from the unemployed, temporary unemployed (automotive industry), retired, students, and other local groups, it is far from ideal. Vegetable growers need skilled labor for a longer period of time. Temporary contract work is limited by the Czech labor law: it cannot exceed 300 hours in a calendar year and there is a monthly income ceiling at 10,000 CZK (\$405). By the time the producer trains the new temporary labor, the workers are basically leaving the job.

The Vegetable Union of the Czechia and Moravia are seeking a temporary exemption from the Czech labor law that would increase or suspend the monthly income ceiling for the temporary workers. They would like this exemption to last for at least three months. The Ministry of Agriculture supports the idea and will make an effort to prepare the legislative change and have it approved by the government.

Bringing of the trained foreign workers by special flights would be another option, however, borders of the countries, from where they come (Ukraine, Moldavia, Bulgaria, Romania) remain closed and will not let those workers travel, according to the Vegetable Union representative.

Attachments:

No Attachments.