

Canadian Agricultural Immigrant Trainees Program and Its Evaluation

Takashi Ohki

5 May 2026

1. Background to the Establishment of the Program

This document has been compiled based on a report by the Japan International Cooperation Agency and my own observations.

In Canada during the 1960s, labour shortages in the agricultural sector had become a serious social problem. In rural areas such as Alberta, in particular, the exodus of young workers to the cities was pronounced, and farms were struggling to maintain operations. In addition, the Canadian government revised its traditional white-preference immigration policy in 1962 and, in 1966, introduced a policy of accepting immigrants based on economic and social needs (the Immigration White Paper). Coupled with the increased demand for labour associated with events such as the 1967 Montreal World's Fair (Expo 67), the conditions were being established for a rapid increase in the number of Asian immigrants. Furthermore, in 1967, there was a major change in immigration policy, with the introduction of a points-based system to standardize the screening of immigrants from around the world. This led to a significant easing of restrictions on immigration from Japan.

Whereas skilled migrants to Canada tended to be proactive, moving in search of higher wages, agricultural migrants were highly sought by the Canadian side because they were tied to the land and could thus contribute to Canada's long-term land development. Meanwhile, Japan was entering a period of rapid economic growth; the exodus of young people to urban centres was creating a labour surplus, whilst an increasing number were showing a strong interest in emigrating abroad. At that time, agricultural migration to South American countries had reached an impasse due to soaring land prices and the difficulties of the agency-run system; consequently, the Overseas Migration Agency (later the Japan International Cooperation Agency) turned its attention to Canada, with its vast expanses of land suitable for agriculture.

The Canadian government, too, desired to accept workers not merely for training but as 'immigrants'; consequently, the programme was designed with the premise of future permanent residence. Japanese Canadians who had been in Canada before the Pacific War, and those who had been forcibly relocated from the coastal areas of British Columbia to work on sugar beet farms in southern Alberta during the war and remained there afterward, had already established a stable business foundation. These Japanese Canadians were favourable towards the acceptance of agricultural workers from Japan. Consequently, whilst the training scheme was not limited to Alberta and could have been extended across the whole of Canada, the first group of trainees was dispatched in April 1969, marking the launch of the scheme, with host organisations primarily comprising potato producers' associations in southern Alberta where large numbers of Japanese Canadians were involved.

2. Overview of the Programme

This Agricultural Migration Training Programme aimed to dispatch young people from rural Japan to Canada. Through two years of agricultural training and work, the programme sought to cultivate the

management skills required for Canada's modern, large-scale mechanized agriculture, whilst enhancing participants' ability to adapt to Canadian society and nurturing them into core personnel for future immigration to Canada. From the outset, the programme incorporated two objectives—agricultural training and immigration to Canada—which were not necessarily aligned. Eligibility was restricted to men aged between 18 and 23 who had at least three years' agricultural experience or were graduates of agricultural high schools, and who were able to operate large-scale agricultural machinery and cook for themselves. Although travel expenses (approximately 169,000 yen for the journey from Tokyo to Calgary) were entirely self-funded, half the cost of pre-departure training in English and agricultural machinery operation provided by the organization was subsidized.

Upon arrival in Canada, the trainees entered into employment agreements with designated host farmers (primarily Japanese Canadian farmers) and engaged in agricultural work centred on potatoes, sugar beet and wheat. In terms of remuneration, a basic monthly wage of 425 Canadian dollars was paid in the first year and 475 Canadian dollars in the following year; host farmers were obliged to provide accommodation with sanitary facilities, a personal bed, heating, and lighting, all free of charge. Working hours varied by month: whilst they were 8 to 9 hours per day in winter, during the busy farming season from May to November, gruelling conditions were imposed, with hours ranging from 10 to 13 hours.

Furthermore, a mutual aid fund system was established, in which both young agricultural migrants and their employers contributed equal amounts to cover unforeseen accidents and resolve problems. The programme went beyond the mere provision of labour, incorporating language acquisition and cross-cultural exchange; participants were encouraged to continue working and apply for permanent residency after the two-year contract had ended.

2.1 Employment Agreement between Employer and Trainee

Article 1 General Provisions

For the period from () to (), the host farmer agrees to provide the trainee with practical agricultural training, and the trainee agrees to diligently carry out the required practical agricultural training under the host farmer's instruction and supervision. Practical training shall take place on all days except Canadian public holidays (Sundays and public holidays) and the first three days of the New Year. The maximum daily working hours shall be set monthly; provided the trainee consents, work exceeding these hours or on the aforementioned public holidays shall not be prohibited. The maximum monthly working hours are as follows:

- January and February: 8 hours
- March: 9 hours
- April and May: 12 hours
- June, July and August: 10 hours
- September and October: 13 hours
- November: 10 hours

- December: This month shall be set aside for a joint training programme for trainees, during which they shall be exempt from practical work on the farm.

Article 2: Accommodation

The host farmer agrees to provide the trainee with healthy accommodation equipped with sanitary facilities free of charge for the duration of the training period. Accommodation facilities shall include the following: tables, chairs, individual beds, mattresses, adequate heating, lighting, windows, a laundry area, and bathing or shower facilities. If trainees prepare their own meals, a refrigerator for food storage, cooking and dining utensils, and a secure place to store other valuables shall be provided. Blankets, sheets, pillowcases and towels shall be provided by the host farmer, who shall lend funds for their purchase at the trainee's request. Trainees must not be accommodated together with other workers not associated with this programme. The costs of electricity, fuel, water and waste disposal must not be charged to the trainees or deducted from their wages.

Article 3: Insurance against Work-Related Injuries or Illnesses

The host farmer agrees to provide, free of charge, insurance for trainees covering injuries caused by and occurring during the training, as well as illnesses directly attributable to the trainee's work, and life insurance for the duration of the placement. This insurance must be obtained from a reputable insurance company.

Article 4: Insurance for Non-Occupational Injuries and Illnesses

The costs of insurance for non-occupational injuries or illnesses sustained by the trainee shall be borne by the trainee.

Article 5 Payment of Wages

1. The Host Farmer shall, in order to ensure the livelihood of trainees who faithfully perform the duties set out in Article 1, pay a basic monthly wage of \$250 in the first year and \$275 in the second year, commencing from the date of arrival at the farm (excluding December during the training period). However, for work performed in excess of the maximum working hours stipulated in Article 1, as well as work performed on public holidays, an overtime rate of \$1.20 per hour shall be paid. Provided, however, that if the total number of working hours from Monday to Saturday does not exceed six times the maximum working hours specified in Article 1, no overtime pay shall be paid for hours worked in excess of the maximum working hours on any single day within that week.
2. All monthly wages and other payments shall be settled by the 3rd of the following month.
3. The Host Farmer shall make wage payments once a month (or once every two weeks) in accordance with current practice.

Article 6: Farm Tools and Equipment

The Host Farmer shall provide the Trainee, free of charge, with all farm tools, supplies, or equipment necessary to perform the services under this Agreement. The host farmer shall not require the trainee to

pay compensation for damage to agricultural machinery and equipment that is not caused by the trainee's wilful misconduct.

Article 7 Deductions

The host farmer agrees not to make any deductions from the trainee's wages other than the following: (1) Income tax (2) Unemployment insurance (3) Canada Pension Plan (4) Advances against wages (5) Overpayments of wages (6) The cost of meals provided by the Host Farmer in accordance with Article 12 (7) Losses incurred by the Host Farmer arising from the Trainee's refusal to return property provided by the Host Farmer, or from the Trainee's failure to return such property through negligence, or from the Trainee's wilful destruction of such property (8) Any debt owed by the trainee to the host farmer remaining upon the expiry of the agreement or should the trainee abandon the training agreement

Article 8

The trainee must be free to purchase personal supplies and must be given the opportunity to visit a place where such purchases can be made once a week. Transport for the purchase of these supplies shall be provided by the host farmer.

Article 9 Serious Illness, Accident and Death of Trainees

In the event of a trainee's serious illness, accident or death, the host farmer shall make appropriate arrangements for hospitalization, medical care and other necessary measures, and shall immediately notify the receiving organization and the representative in Toronto. In the event of a trainee's death, the host farmer shall have the body cremated and send the ashes to the receiving organization. The expenses incurred for the funeral, cremation and the return of the ashes to Japan shall be covered by the life insurance proceeds under Article 3 and funds contributed by the host organisation and the host farmer.

Article 10 Mutual Aid Fund

1. A Mutual Aid Fund shall be established to resolve unforeseen accidents or problems arising in connection with this programme.
2. A Mutual Aid Fund Management Committee shall be established to manage and administer this fund. The Committee shall consist of one representative from the Overseas Migration Service, two representatives from the Alberta Potato Association, and two representatives from the Canadian migrant trainees.
3. The amount of the contribution shall be determined annually through consultation; however, from April 1971 to March 1973, the monthly contribution for both trainees and farm owners shall be C\$3. Each farm owner shall remit the contributions from both parties to the Mutual Aid Fund Management Committee by the 5th of the following month.

Article 11: Handling of Complaints

Complaints between a host farmer and a trainee shall first be resolved by the host farmer and the trainee group leader. If a mutually satisfactory resolution cannot be reached between the two parties,

the matter shall be reported to the representative of the host organisation, who shall do their utmost to resolve it, with the assistance of the representative in Toronto if necessary.

Article 12: Meals

Where a host farmer provides meals to a trainee, these shall be provided at cost price, and under no circumstances shall the trainee's contribution exceed \$0.50 per month.

Article 13: Prohibition of Discrimination in Employment

The host farmer shall not subject trainees to discriminatory treatment that places them at a social or economic disadvantage in the conditions of their placement. The host farmer shall endeavour to provide opportunities for trainees to interact with Canadian citizens during the placement period.

Article 14: Retention of Records and Documentation

Host farmers shall maintain accurate records of each trainee's earnings and hours worked, and shall provide these to the trainee at the time of wage payment.

Article 15: Protection against Immoral and Illegal Influences

Host farmers agree to take measures to keep professional gamblers, liquor peddlers, and those engaged in immoral or illegal activities away from the training site.

2.2 Trainees' Status under Canadian Immigration Law

JICA (formerly the Japan Overseas Migration Service) regarded this scheme as one aimed at the 'training and preparation of prospective emigrants', and the trainees were not immigrants. Under the Canadian immigration system, trainees were classified as Temporary Workers; they entered Canada on a work visa, and their stay was limited to the duration of the training period. In other words, the trainees did not hold permanent residency. However, the Canadian authorities hoped that trainees would remain in Canada after the training period and encouraged them to apply for permanent residency. In fact, those trainees who remained in Canada (including those who stayed for a period after the training ended and those who left their employers before the training ended but remained in Canada) obtained permanent residency. It is believed that trainees were aware that participating in this scheme would enable them to obtain permanent residency after the training.

3. Evaluation of the Canadian Agricultural Training and Migration Scheme

In 1980, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) published the 'Report on the Status of Canadian Agricultural Migration Trainees'. Under this program, JICA sent 220 trainees to Canada between 1969 and 1976. In March 1978, the agency confirmed the addresses and current circumstances of all trainees through their families back home. Although the report is based on these survey results, it was not possible to trace all trainees residing in Canada. Due to the survey's incomplete nature, the study focused only on those whose whereabouts were known to the JICA representative stationed in Toronto at the time.

According to this survey, 220 individuals came to Canada as trainees between 1969 and 1976; by March 1978, 70 had returned to Japan, 96 were residing in Canada, and 54 were unaccounted for. The report

states that it is highly likely that a significant number of the trainees residing in Canada have either returned to Japan or are unaccounted for. The majority of trainees who responded to the survey valued the experience of living abroad during their youth and the opportunity to operate large-scale agricultural machinery in Canada; however, they also pointed out problems with the program.

The greatest issue was the harsh working conditions and the discrepancy between these conditions and their status as ‘trainees’. Although many young people participated in the dream of learning modern agriculture, in reality, they were forced to work long hours performing simple tasks as ‘farm helpers’, treated almost like machines, and the work was so arduous that they had no time to learn the language. Furthermore, the ambiguous dual-track program design—vague distinction between immigrants and trainees—gave rise to dissatisfaction. Frequent emotional misunderstandings and disputes arose between trainees, who sought the warm, family-like relationships typical of Japan, and host farmers (mainly second-generation Japanese Canadians), who operated on the premise of a formal, Canadian-style employment relationship, particularly regarding working practices and meal provision. The project organization was also criticized for lacking a financial support system, such as low-interest loans, for young people aiming to become self-reliant after their contracts expired, and for an unclear path to independence.

To resolve this duality, in 1974, the term ‘trainees’ was removed from the name, and the programme was renamed the ‘Southern Alberta Agricultural Youth Migration Programme’; however, there was no end to the number of people who ran away from their host farms mid-contract or returned to Japan. Ultimately, a combination of factors—including the easing of labour shortages in Canada due to the advancement of agricultural mechanization, the increased difficulty in obtaining permanent residence visas following changes to the Canadian government’s immigration policy and a policy prioritizing domestic unemployed workers, and a decline in enthusiasm for emigration in Japan—led to the programme being effectively suspended at the end of the 1977 financial year.

Looking at the details of the working conditions, contrary to the dream of learning modern agriculture, the trainees’ work centred on long hours of simple, repetitive tasks as ‘farm helpers’, where they were essentially put to work by machines; it was gruelling work that left them no time to catch their breath. Due to the unique climate of southern Alberta, where rainfall is scarce in summer, irrigation work was crucial; moreover, tasks were concentrated into a short period during the harvest season, and the trainees were forced to endure particularly harsh labour, especially in their first year due to their lack of experience.

Working hours were set monthly under the employment agreement: eight hours a day during the off-season months of January and February, but 12 hours during the peak farming months of May and June, rising to a maximum of 13 hours in September and October. Even when working strictly within the terms of the contract, there were days during the busy season when labour stretched to 14 or 15 hours a day, placing a considerable mental and physical strain on young people aged 18 or 19 with little social experience.

Wages varied depending on when the agreement was revised; in the first year (at the time of the 1972 revision), basic pay ranged from 250 to 425 Canadian dollars per month, and in the following year, from 275 to 475 Canadian dollars. Overtime pay was provided for work on public holidays.

Host farmers were obliged to provide trainees with healthy accommodation equipped with sanitary facilities free of charge. The accommodation was to be fully equipped with tables, chairs, individual beds, mattresses, adequate heating and lighting, windows, a laundry area, and bathing or shower facilities; the costs of electricity, fuel and water were to be borne by the farmer (and could not be deducted from wages).

Regarding meals, whilst it was often the case that the farm owners provided both accommodation and meals, there were also many instances where trainees were required to cook for themselves. In such cases, the farm owners provided refrigerators and cooking utensils; however, the reality of having to prepare all meals oneself after 14 to 15 hours of heavy labour each day was harsh, and many trainees complained that 'during particularly busy periods, it would be acceptable for the farm owners to invite us to eat with them'.

Furthermore, interpersonal conflicts frequently arose within the living environment. Whilst the trainees sought the warm, family-like atmosphere of Japan, many of the host farmers (primarily second-generation Japanese Canadians) prioritized a business-like, detached 'employer-employee' relationship. Consequently, emotional misunderstandings about working practices and meal provision led to significant dissatisfaction.

4. Personal Comments

Following the amendment of Canada's immigration regulations in 1976, immigration from Japan to Canada increased; however, many of these new immigrants (referred to as 'new Japanese immigrants' within Canada's Japanese community) were professionals or skilled workers, and very few applied to immigrate specifically to work in agriculture. The Canadian Agricultural Immigrant Trainee Programme was designed to promote a small number of agricultural immigrants. However, unlike other professions, engaging in agriculture requires substantial capital investment in land and agricultural machinery to run a farm independently. Without a source of funding for this capital investment, it was difficult to become an independent farmer. The Agricultural Immigrant Trainee Programme, as the name suggests, provided training only; there was no support for the subsequent stages. If this programme is evaluated against the criterion of 'settling in Canada through farming', it cannot be said to have fulfilled its purpose. However, there were also trainees who came to Canada, obtained permanent residency either before or after their contracts ended, and settled by pursuing careers outside the agricultural sector. From these trainees' perspective, settling in Canada through this scheme was a personal success, and the program's contribution is evident.

I taught at the University of Lethbridge from September 1969 to August 1975. One day in the autumn of 1970, eight agricultural trainees from the first and second cohorts visited my home. They told me that the reality of the agricultural training was vastly different from what they had anticipated in Japan, and whilst they wished to stop the training, they were unsure whether they could do so as they were bound by a two-year contract. They asked me whether they would be held criminally liable for breaching the contract. It was at that time that the trainees showed me the contract reproduced in this document. The trainees were particularly shocked by the following clause.

Article 9: Serious Illness, Accident and Death of a Trainee

In the event of a trainee's serious illness, accident or death, the host farmer shall make appropriate arrangements for hospitalization, medical care and other necessary measures, and shall immediately notify the receiving organization and the representative in Toronto. In the event of the trainee's death, the host farmer shall have the body cremated and send the ashes to the receiving organization. The expenses incurred for the funeral, cremation, and the return of the ashes to Japan shall be covered by the life insurance proceeds under Article 3 and cooperative funds from the receiving organisation and the host farmer.

They were worried that they might return to Japan as ashes. I showed this contract to the university's legal adviser and sought his opinion. The lawyer opined that a contract containing such terms of employment was invalid, and that even if the trainee terminated the employment relationship midway through the contract, the employer could take no action against the trainee. I immediately conveyed the lawyer's opinion to the trainee.

I moved to Edmonton in the summer of 1975. In Edmonton, former trainees were working in various professions at the time (carpenters, university students, sheet metal workers, bakers, furniture makers, and so on). I formed a group with these people and continued to exchange information and socialize. Some returned to Japan, whilst others changed careers. As of 2026, there are still a few former trainees in Edmonton, and we continue to keep in touch.