

# THOMPSON-OKANAGAN REGION: AGRICULTURE PROFILE



## Key Features

- The Thompson-Okanagan region has an extremely diverse terrain, and the climate varies considerably due to the complex topography.
- Good soil and climate allow for a wide variety of crops to be grown.
- Production ranges from fruit orchards and vineyards to field crops, cattle, dairy, poultry, and hogs.
- Commercial, farm gate, and estate wineries produce award-winning premium wines for markets across North America.
- The commercial orchards in the region produce about 30% of Canada's apple crop.
- Good-quality rangeland supports summer grazing for the cattle industry.
- In general, the region experiences a mild climate, with low annual precipitation.
- Annual precipitation: 257 to 534 mm.
- Frost-free days: 148 to 175.

2016 Census of Agriculture	
Population	546,287
Land in the Agriculture Land Reserve (ALR)	808,838 ha
Total Farmland Area	775,726 ha
Number of Farms	4,759
Total Salaries/Wages *	\$108,615,870
Gross Farm Receipts	\$632.7 million
Total Farm Capital	\$9.44 billion

*\*Source: 2016, Census of Agriculture and Tax Linkage, Statistics Canada*

## The Thompson-Okanagan Region

Located in the Central Interior of the province and starting south at Osoyoos along the Washington State border, the Thompson-Okanagan region stretches northward to Mount Robson and to the Alberta border in the west and Wells Gray Provincial Park in the east. The region covers the Okanagan, Similkameen, Nicola, and Thompson River valleys, as well as the Trans-Canada Highway and CP Rail and CN Rail corridors from the town of Revelstoke to the Fraser Canyon at Lytton. It contains 10.2% of the province's land area and has an estimated population of 546,287, representing about 11.8% of the provincial total, with Kelowna and Kamloops being the largest urban centres. Its primary industries are agriculture, forestry, mining, and tourism, with manufacturing, transportation, technology, and trade services also being key contributors to the regional economy.

### Land

The Thompson-Okanagan region covers 9,419,776 hectares, and about 8.6% (808,838 hectares) of the land is in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). This represents 17.5% of the total provincial ALR. Of the 775,726 hectares of farmland area, 74% is natural land for pasture/grazing, 13% is in crops, and 13% is in other agricultural commodities. The area planted in crops is comprised of 71% hay, 13% field crops, 13% fruits and berries, and 3% other crops.

The topography of the region is one of sharp contrasts, from dry, hot grasslands to wet areas and rugged mountains, as well as drainage basins of large rivers, including the Fraser, Thompson, and Okanagan.

Climate varies considerably over short distances due to the complex topography of the area. The mountainous northern portion of the region is densely forested with Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, and white and Engelmann spruce. In the central and southern portions, the landscape becomes drier and gentler, with rolling uplands, lakes, and ponderosa pine-fir forests and grasslands in the river valleys.



*Photo courtesy of the BC Ministry of Agriculture — Black Angus grazing spring pasture*

Due to the semi-arid climate in the majority of the region, agriculture production relies heavily on the use of irrigation from nearby lakes and rivers. Competing demands for water from both agriculture and land development create challenges and limitations on the ongoing use of irrigation.

While somewhat variable, farmland tends to be relatively expensive in this area due to pressure for residential development, especially around the major centres and lakes. Farmland values in the Okanagan are some of the highest in BC, with the Thompson-Nicola below the provincial average.

## **Agriculture**

This semi-arid region, particularly in the south, has fertile soil, hot summers, and relatively mild winters — these make for exceptional growing conditions, especially with irrigation. The Thompson-Okanagan region grows a wide variety of commercial crops, from fruits, berries, vegetables, and melons to forage and grain crops. Vineyards, orchards, and cattle have been a traditional part of the region's character, and next to the Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley, the Okanagan Valley is the most important agricultural region in the province, with the primary crop being fruit trees.

In 2016, the 4,759 farms in the region generated sales of about \$632.6 million, from a capital investment of about \$9.4 billion in land, livestock, grains, buildings, and machinery, representing about 17% of the province's total gross farm receipts. The majority of the gross farm receipts in the region are from tree fruits and grapes, beef cattle, dairy, and poultry.

In the Okanagan, most agriculture is in the major valleys around Keremeos and Cawston, from Osoyoos to Salmon Arm (including Oliver and Penticton) and Kelowna, and from Vernon east to Lumby. The numerous climates within the region provide ideal growing conditions for fruit, and the majority of BC's fruit growing trees are located in the Okanagan Valley, including apples, pears, cherries, apricots, peaches,

prune plums, and nectarines. The region also yields large amounts of raspberries and grapes to support a high-quality wine sector in BC.

The natural grasslands and improved pastures of the Thompson-Nicola area support forage production and cattle ranching. For summer grazing, most ranching in this region is dependent on the use of forest and range on Crown land, where ranching and logging are both integrated and compatible. Significant forage production in the area supports winter feed requirements for livestock. The Thompson-Okanagan region contains about 15% of BC's total area of forage lands. There is a potential for growth in cattle backgrounding operations, which involve the feeding of younger cattle to a more mature stage for finishing in some of the regions' many feedlots.

In the North Okanagan and Columbia Shuswap areas, dairy, poultry, other livestock operations, and grain and forage crops are the prevalent types of agricultural activity. The number of dairy farms in this area has increased significantly over the past several years due to increases in local population and demand.

A strong local economy and tourism industry provide opportunities for continued growth in direct farm marketing and local food and food-related products. Wineries, distilleries, farm markets, and agri-tourism operations are all areas of growth potential and add value to farm gate production. Farms, orchards, and vineyards are becoming more closely integrated with tourism activities in the region, providing resilience against market downturns and crop failures due to weather and other factors.



*Photo courtesy of the BC Ministry of Agriculture — apples in the Okanagan*

## **Food Processing**

The fruit and alcoholic beverage processors are significant employers in the region and play a vital role in the grape and tree fruit industry. There are many successful fruit juice firms, as well as newly established producers of other specialty fruit products, that are extensions of the fruit industry (sweets, jams, fruit leather).

There are 212 licensed wineries located in the Okanagan, Similkameen, and Thompson valleys, the Shuswap river area, and Lillooet, and their products have steadily increased in both sales and quality level. BC wineries now produce a competitive line of award-winning and internationally recognized wines under the VQA label. Estate wineries, which must produce wines from their own grapes, are typically small and producer owned.

### **Selected Crop and Livestock Inventories (2016 Census)**

For detailed statistics for the Thompson-Okanagan Region, see the [Agriculture in Brief](#) tables from the BC Ministry of Agriculture.

### **Sub-region Agriculture Statistics**

[Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen](#)

[Regional District of Central Okanagan](#)

[Regional District of North Okanagan](#)

[Columbia-Shuswap Regional District](#)

[Thompson-Nicola Regional District](#)