

10 Point Agricultural Workforce Plan

NSW Farmers' ten-point-plan to tackle seasonal labour shortages in the agricultural sector



The agricultural industry is experiencing a workforce crisis

International and inter-state border restrictions have significantly impacted on agricultural workforce issues. In 2018-19, around 40-50 per cent of the national casual and contract workforce employed on farms were international workers. In NSW alone, 11,000 international workers were employed on farm in November 2018. In April 2019, following the summer harvest, 8,000 international farm workers were employed. The prolonged closure of international borders since March 2020 has significantly reduced the pool of international workers.

In addition to the shrinking pool of seasonal workers the industry is also challenged with restricted worker mobility from rapidly changing intra-state lockdown measures and inter-state border restrictions. Urgent government action is critical to address the workforce shortages experienced in agriculture to enable farmers in NSW to capitalise on improved seasonal conditions after a long period of drought.

NSW Farmers calls on the NSW Government to implement the following immediate measures:

1. Certainty for mobile workers

Businesses, workers and border communities continue to face challenges as rapidly changing border closures impact the reliability, continuity, and availability of agricultural workers. This directly impacts the available domestic workforce as they are unwilling (or unable) to travel outside their home state for risk of incurring quarantine and the associated costs upon their return. Despite the Agricultural Workers' Code, there is still no consistent approach amongst states to facilitate the movement of agricultural workers (e.g. in permit application process, validity of permit, etc).

Farm businesses and workers require certainty, clarity of information as well as a practical, timely and consistent permit system to enable workers to move from farm to farm and return to their home.

2. Targeted communications campaign

With international border closures likely to be prolonged into 2022 and the Seasonal Workers Program and Pacific Labour Scheme presenting several challenges, attracting domestic and international workers already onshore to meet some of the labour demand is a high priority. A targeted and coordinated approach to highlight the job opportunities in agriculture will help to bridge the gap between the industry needs and current workforce views of jobs and careers in agriculture.

The NSW Government successfully established the Help Harvest NSW website last year. It is sensible to now develop Help Harvest NSW into a proactive communications campaign to highlight the opportunities available in agriculture through mainstream and social media. Communications should target specific categories of the workforce (e.g. university students, grey nomads, people looking for a tree change) for maximum reach and increasing broad appeal.



3. Coordination assistance

Seasonal work in agriculture by its very nature is short in duration (less than 3 months) and geographically diverse. Proactive coordination and facilitation of worker movement from harvest region to harvest region is critical to support the allocation of interested workers to the right region at the right time.

NSW Farmers calls for the establishment of a network of 'Help Harvest NSW' coordinators as the conduit between interested workers, farm businesses, government agencies and relevant stakeholders in the regions. This network of on the ground coordinators, supported by a centrally managed source of information and updates, will be key to promote, coordinate, organise and ultimately deliver workers for farmers and farm businesses. It would help match potential workers from schools, universities, grey nomads, local job seekers and others.

4. Incentives to participate in agriculture work

The agricultural industry is critical to the health and welfare of the state. All options should be considered to increase attractiveness of participation in agricultural work. This includes bonus payments that are linked to a specified period of participation in agriculture work, access to public transport subsidy for international students, additional Dine and Discover vouchers, HECS relief/credits to encourage domestic university students, relief/concessions to encourage retired/semi-retired pensioners.

5. Localised initiatives

Industry bodies and local growing groups are best informed of the challenges facing businesses in their region, which can range from issues relating to COVID-19 safe accommodation, COVID-19 safe transportation, connectivity and supporting health facilities.

We call on the government to provide grants to implement novel or localised initiatives to attract and/or facilitate COVID-19 safe movement and stay of seasonal workers, especially in light of the new challenges posed by the highly infectious Delta strain.

6. Facilitate timely flow of international seasonal workers

Extended approval processes, quarantine limitations and arrangements has stalled the timely arrivals of workers through the Seasonal Workers Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme. NSW Farmers call for improved facilitation of timely inflow of international seasonal workers through the current scheme and the impending Agriculture Workforce Visa.



7. Create and deploy ‘harvest ready’ training and upskilling

It is no longer sufficient for farm businesses to rely on the usual pool of workers who would have experience working in agriculture. Creation and deployment of “harvest ready” training would quickly equip inexperienced workers with skills required in harvest work. A one-day training program developed by Grain Producers Australia and Tocal can be replicated and enhanced across industry.

Additionally, we call for expanded access to fully funded short courses relevant to agriculture to aid regional on-farm employment under Smart and Skilled guidelines. These short courses would help fast-track employment on farms. Courses should be extended to include pesticide and spraying, machinery health, drone safety operations.

8. Assist agricultural businesses to strengthen COVID-19 mitigation measures

The highly infectious COVID-19 Delta strain has substantially increased the risk of infection spread in the workplace which would need to be carefully managed. Farm businesses and the agricultural supply chain continuing to operate in this environment face additional costs due to implementing strategies to effectively manage the risk of disease transmission. Primarily, they are requiring new employees from outside the regions to self-isolate, and implementing strict social distancing measures between staff, which is creating inefficiencies in operations. Implementation of new mitigation measures such as rapid antigen testing would increase confidence of workers and the local communities but will confront businesses with additional costs. These businesses need short-term financial assistance to ensure that they can access the level of employment need while providing a COVID-19 safe work environment to ensure fresh food production during this health crisis.



9. Appropriate accommodation options

One of the significant challenges of COVID-19 is the need for physical distancing. As large sectors of the horticulture and grains industry moves into harvest there will be increased need for casual labour, who are typically located on farms in multi-occupancy dwellings or transported from hostels. To effectively manage the risk of disease transmission these industries need access to appropriate accommodation options.

This challenge requires a staggered response. In the short-term we call on the State government to help meet the costs of these critical seasonal workers staying in either vacant regional motels or in caravans or campervans moved into regions.

In the short- to medium-term solution we call on the State government to provide funds to support small and medium sized family farms in the supply of temporary and permanent COVID-19 safe on farm accommodation to attract domestic seasonal workforce. Such a strategy has broader benefits and could lead to longer-term economic benefit in regional areas.

10. Establish an Agriculture Seasonal Workforce Working Group

A working group must be immediately established. The working group would consist of government agencies and industry stakeholders to find and implement timely and sustainable solutions to address seasonal workforce shortages in NSW agriculture.

COVID-19 has amplified the problem by many folds, and solutions to this crisis require coordination and collaboration between the various government agencies and industry stakeholders. Now is the time to think and plan for the future.



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