



More needed to ease farmers' workforce pain

19 November 2019

The National Farmers' Federation Horticulture Council acknowledges the Government's recognition of the chronic workforce shortages facing Australian farmers, in an announcement made in the Victorian Mallee region this morning.

Led by Minister for Agriculture, Senator Bridget McKenzie the announcement confirmed and slightly expanded a number of the initiatives introduced to address farm workforce shortages over the past 18 months.

The announcement was on the back of the data released by the Victorian Farmers Federation in November, indicating that 28% of the workforce in the Sunraysia region was undocumented, demonstrating that there was an issue in horticulture that could no longer be overlooked.

"These measures are a good start, but much more is needed," NFF Chief Executive Officer Tony Mahar said.

"Expanding the Seasonal Worker Program Pilot to provide 1000 more workers to a small region of the country is a step in the right direction.

"We will be encouraging growers to give feedback to the Government on the successes and failures of the pilot. However, it should be seen as another small step on the longer journey towards a sustainable agricultural workforce.

"For example, although the Sunraysia has provided a case study for the issues facing the horticulture industry, extending the pilot program to all regions where worker shortages exist would be more meaningful.

"It would assist mango growers in the Northern Territory as well as vegetables growers in Western Australia to find the workers they so desperately need to pick and pack their produce."

Similarly, AUSVEG made a submission earlier today on behalf of the horticulture industry for an Industry Labour Agreement to assist growers nationwide to access the longer term, skilled workforce it needs.

However, Mr Mahar said the farm sector was looking for a more sophisticated approach to a very complex problem.

"While such an approach should include a dedicated initiative, such as tailored migration programs, it should also include initiatives which support cultural change and understanding.

"Indeed, the current regime could mean, in a worse case scenario, that today's announcement may result in yet more complexity and confusion which will only further entrench the challenges facing the sector."

The NFF suggests the Government should focus on assisting farmers to better understand the workforce options available to them.

"For example, the Government is funding the Australian Border Force and the Fair Work Ombudsman to increase compliance.

"We believe this funding would be more effective if it was directed to educating farmers on the labour programs which are available and helping them to craft individual workforce solutions on a one-on-one basis rather than prosecuting them.

"Family farms may rely on an inefficient — even at times an unlawfully sourced workforce, because they are not aware of and do not understand the viable alternatives.

"A productive use of government resources would be a nationwide workforce counselling service with people on the ground who can reach out to individual farms to explain the myriad of programs: including the various iterations of the Pacific Labour Schemes; the Working Holiday Maker programs; local workforce solutions, VET training incentives; the Harvest Trail Service, and industry labour agreements.

"These teams on the ground could work with farmers to design a workforce solution which is best suited to the needs of their business, while helping them to understand and meet their obligations.

"Solving farmers' workforce challenges is difficult and it won't happen overnight, but doing so is essential if agriculture is to reach its potential as a \$100 billion industry by 2030.

"We appreciate the Government taking this small step in the right direction today and look forward to a truly national approach, because the farm workforce crisis is not isolated to one state or sector," Mr Mahar said