

Media Release

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Budget delivers welcome investment in the PALM scheme, skills and accommodation

The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) welcomes the Federal Government's budget which supports more employers to engage workers through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, tackles skills shortages, and seeks to improve housing availability.

"Labour and skills shortages, and a lack of accommodation in regional communities, are some of the biggest obstacles our industry is facing. While there's more to be done, the Government's Budget is a good first step toward addressing these challenges through improvements to the PALM scheme, more fee-free training and education positions for the agriculture sector, and a plan to build a million new homes across Australia" said AFPA CEO Claire McClelland.

A key announcement for the fresh produce industry is the range of commitments made by the Government to further expand and improve the PALM scheme. Measures include the reimbursement of worker travel costs that cannot be recouped by the employer through no fault of their own and increased resourcing to grow the PALM scheme and intensify action against unscrupulous operators who encourage PALM scheme workers to disengage in breach of their visa conditions.

"The Government's measure to effectively underwrite flights costs of workers will support Approved Employers to further invest and recruit through the scheme. This commitment makes sense as it helps employers manage the risks associated with upfront costs, while avoiding unnecessary red-tape, and makes recruitment within the PALM scheme more attractive to horticulture businesses," said Ms McClelland.

The Government has also committed additional resourcing to the PALM scheme to increase the number of PALM workers participating in the program to 35,000 by June 2023. This is coupled with resourcing to engage in further action against unscrupulous operators who encourage workers to breach their visa conditions.

"AFPA members currently employ 5,700 PALM workers, or a third of the PALM workers engaged in the horticulture sector. Increased resources to support more PALM workers engaging in the program acknowledges just how critical the PALM scheme is to our industry".

"Members of the AFPA strongly support the standards and worker welfare obligations included in the PALM scheme. Additional support to ensure these standards are enforced, and workers are protected, are warmly welcomed by the horticulture industry," said Ms McClelland.

The AFPA also welcome the increased investment in skills and training, through 480,000 fee-free TAFE places, as well as the National Housing Accord to increase the stock of housing, and calls on the Government to allocate agriculture and regional communities a fair share of the funding – access to suitable accommodation, and skills across technical and professional roles in fresh produce are essential for industry's growth.

"Australia's fruit and vegetable growers are going through some of the toughest operating conditions of recent history - extreme weather, rising input costs, labour and skills shortages and a range of other challenges are all contributing to the pressure on our producers. There is no silver bullet but the measures in this Budget should combine to ease some of the strain on industry," said Ms McClelland.

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