

Media Release

30 September 2020

Harvest horror: 26,000 people short ahead of bumper fruit and vegetable season

A recently released report by EY details that the Australian fruit and vegetable industry is facing a workforce shortage of up to 26,000 people throughout the peak summer season. A shortage of workers will have a real impact on Australian consumers, with price increases and likely shortages of fruit and vegetables in supermarkets.

The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) has previously welcomed the restart of the Seasonal Worker Program, allowing workers from the Pacific to come to Australia and help to pick fruit and vegetables. Despite this no new workers have arrived in Australia, leaving many growers without a workforce to harvest their crop.

“We have been working with relevant State and Territory governments, as well as Federal Departments to assist in restarting this program, but still, no new workers have arrived in Australia and in most states we’re at least 6-10 weeks away from that even looking likely” said AFPA CEO, Michael Rogers.

The restart of the Seasonal Worker Program, as well as incentives to attract Australians to undertake harvest work have been on the top of industry’s priorities for months, however, few Australians have taken up State government incentives to do harvest work. This is despite a \$3 million campaign in Western Australia, \$17 million in Victoria, \$1.9 million in Tasmania and \$1.1 million in Queensland.

Meanwhile, industry workforce shortages are now urgent, with growers in Western Australia and Queensland having already destroyed or are in the process of destroying crops due to a lack of harvest workers.

“This week a citrus grower in Queensland is bulldozing hectares of citrus because he is not confident of there being labour available now, into 2021 and beyond. That’s a decision that is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and several full-time jobs for Australians” said Mr Rogers.

This year, only 6,600 of the usual 12,000 Seasonal Worker Program workers were able to travel to Australia. Industry is desperately seeking an urgent arrival of Pacific workers to make up this shortfall and contribute to filling the 26,000-person shortage predicted.

“With no certainty around workforce, it is likely growers will reduce plantings and planned harvests because of fewer workers. We can’t be any clearer, there will be less fruit and vegetables available in the supermarket and there will be higher prices if we cannot start addressing the shortfall in workforce” said Mr Rogers.

Industry is calling for Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania state governments to immediately prioritise the arrival of Seasonal Workers from the Pacific to ensure Australian families have access to fresh fruit and vegetables.

Media Contact: Michael Rogers - CEO, AFPA: 0409 648 911

About the AFPA - The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) is made up of Australia’s key fresh produce growers and suppliers. The AFPA represents half the industry turnover of the Australian fresh produce sector - \$4.5 billion of the \$9.1 billion total; 1,000 plus growers through commercial arrangements and more than 15,000 direct employees through peak harvest, and up to 25,000 in the grower network.