

Media Release

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Who will pick your fruit and vegetables?

Aussie grown, affordable, fresh, and clean produce on our local supermarket shelves – it is something we all take for granted. But this is being placed in real jeopardy as farmers are losing and abandoning their crops due to not enough workers being available to pick them.

“The lack of available labour is now dire for many farmers, with only 150 people having taken up the Australian Government’s relocation allowance and more than 2,000 foreign backpackers leave Australia each week. Farmers desperately need a national approach from all governments to continue the incentives for Australians to work in the fresh produce industry, efficiently and expeditiously implement a workable pathway to allow seasonal workers from the Pacific entry to Australia, and establish a Harvest Work Visa targeted solely at working in the fresh produce sector”, said Mr Michael Rogers, CEO, Australian Fresh Produce Alliance.

The Australian fruit and vegetable industry is valued at more than \$10 billion annually and employs more than 80,000 people, many of these in regional and rural areas. While there is a lot of focus on the foreign workers who help to pick and pack fresh produce, more than a quarter of the jobs are held by Australians. Any further crop losses will not only affect the supply of fruit and vegetables to our supermarkets but will mean job losses for Australians and economic hardship for regional Australia.

There are normally up to 200,000 backpackers or working holiday maker visa holders in Australia working in tourism, hospitality, agriculture or other sectors, or taking some time to enjoy Australia’s best locations. The number of backpackers has declined to 50,000 and 2,000 backpackers continue to leave every week. Meanwhile there are normally 14,000 workers from the Pacific and Timor Leste working in horticulture but most of the current 6,000 visa holders have been here for more than 12 months and many understandably want to return home.

“There are 50,000 horticulture harvest roles in Australia at any one time. The number of backpackers has reached a critically low point, and the people from the Pacific and Timor Leste need to return to their families after a long stay in Australia. We have reached the tipping point for available workers in Australia – worker shortages are emerging in every state and territory and crop losses are beginning to increase” said Mr Rogers.

Australia’s fresh produce industry has been working with all Governments from the start of COVID to raise the issues, provide evidence and outline the policy changes needed to ensure we have enough people to harvest fruit and vegetables. The Commonwealth, Northern Territory, Queensland, and Tasmanian Governments have been proactively working on these issues however the Victorian and New South Wales Governments have been lagging far behind and show little willingness to act with any sense of urgency.



The AFPA *Plan for Australia's Horticulture Harvest Workforce* (attached) outlines key initiatives which need immediate implementation to address the current workforce challenges and the shortages expected throughout 2021. Any delays risk shortages of produce both in the short term but also in the long term as farmers reduce their plantings and production expectations for 2021.

“The benefits from the bumper crop conditions we have all heard so much about this year will be lost if there are not enough workers to pick the crops. This will place in jeopardy the ability of Aussie farmers to provide affordable, fresh, and nutritious fruit and vegetables for every Australian. What they need right now is your support and action from all levels of government to make sure they can keep doing so” said Mr Rogers.

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.