

Media Release

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Urgency required to turn First Ministers' statements into workers on farms

The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) welcomes the statements by the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers after Friday's National Cabinet meeting confirming the urgency of addressing workforce shortages in the horticulture sector. Urgent action is required by officials to ensure that supportive statements are translated into practical measures which provides workers on farms.

"As companies providing more than half the fruit and vegetables for all Australians, AFPA members welcome the comments by the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers about the importance of getting fruit and vegetables harvested. The key to addressing the workforce shortage in horticulture is urgent action which translates into many more workers on farms" said Michael Rogers, CEO, Australian Fresh Produce Alliance.

Growers and government have been trying different ways to encourage more Australians to pick fruit and vegetables however Australians are only filling approximately 10 per cent of the roles available.

"It is vital that growers and governments continue to work together to provide jobs for any Australian wanting to work in the fruit and vegetable industry. As Australia's economic recovery strengthens, more Australians are returning to their careers and usual employment. For many Australians who are unemployed, location remains a key challenge for working in fresh produce – people in the cities find it difficult to relocate for work in the regions but we must continue to explore and implement supporting initiatives" said Mr Rogers.

The Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Facility provide the opportunity for workers from the Pacific and Timor Leste to undertake harvest work in Australia. These programs are responsible for filling 14,000 roles in industry annually, and their restart is a key part of the solution to ongoing workforce shortages.

"Scalable quarantine pathways are the key to the successful operation of the Seasonal Worker Programme in Australia. Hotel quarantine, on-farm quarantine, and quarantine free arrivals from COVID free countries, so called 'green lane' arrangements, will be key to supporting the usual 14,000 workers to come to Australia under the programme" said Mr Rogers.

As crop losses begin to rise it is becoming clear that farmers' worst fears are being realised – there are not enough workers to pick and pack fruit and vegetables. Industry reports had forecast a shortage of 26,000 workers by March 2021, while the Government's own reports are now estimating price rises of up to 25 per cent.

"Unfortunately there are now concerns about workforce shortages through 2021. We are talking a shortage of thousands of workers, that will only be addressed by urgent action with a scalable solution. Industry has developed a detailed proposal for a horticulture harvest visa which would provide the opportunity for 10,000 people to come to Australia and work. This is a complimentary solution that both addresses the immediate workforce requirements but importantly, builds more resilience into the fruit and vegetable supply chain for the future" said Mr Rogers.

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