

Media Release

4 August 2020

Seasonal Worker Program trial to assist in managing labour shortages

The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) welcomes an announcement that will see up to 170 Seasonal Workers from Vanuatu allowed entry to the Northern Territory to commence the mango harvest.

“We welcome the announcement from Minister Littleproud and appreciate the commitment the government has shown to finding solutions to the workforce challenges being faced by the fresh produce industry as a result of COVID19” said AFPA CEO Michael Rogers.

With more than 80,000 people employed in fresh produce, the current workforce includes significant numbers of seasonal workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste, and backpackers from around the world. However, COVID19 has seen a significant drop in the number of backpackers and seasonal workers currently in Australia and able to undertake harvest work.

Domestic border closures and restrictions are also proving challenging, with it being increasingly difficult for industry to move workers across state borders to harvest fruit and vegetables.

“Harvest roles in fresh produce are seasonal, short term and often require large amounts of workers at one time. The reduction in workers we’re seeing as a result of COVID19, plus the issues we’re finding trying to move workers across production locations is making it even more difficult for fruit and vegetable farmers to secure the workforce needed to continue to supply all Australians with fresh food” said Mr Rogers.

The announcement today will allow up to 170 Seasonal Workers to come to Australia and help with the 2020 harvest. These workers will travel to the Northern Territory and undertake a 14-day quarantine period before commencing harvest work.

“Expanding on trials like this are going to be critically important moving forward - between international travel restrictions and domestic border closures it is increasingly difficult for farmers to source workers. Australians have always been encouraged to do this kind of work, but despite high unemployment we still see application rates from Australians for fruit and vegetable picking roles at 8% or even lower in some regional areas” said Mr Rogers.

There are approximately 70,000 short-term harvest roles in industry, across Australia. The ability to harvest fresh fruit and vegetables underpins farmers profitability but also Australian’s access to fresh fruit and vegetables at their local supermarkets and greengrocers.

“With fewer visa holders in Australia, workforce management in the industry will be key. Trials like this are important so industry can work with government to find practical solutions to any labour shortages. It is important to understand that harvest roles in industry support regional economies, full-time ongoing employment of Australians but most importantly underpin access to fruit and vegetables for all Australians” 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.