

Policy Brief: Career Opportunities in Fresh Produce

Overview

The challenges and opportunities for people employed in the fresh produce sector are regularly covered in media and industry publications. A recent meeting of the AFPA Human Resources Reference Group highlighted that there are 3 discrete areas of employment opportunities for fresh produce: Harvest, Technical Expertise, and Middle Management. This policy brief outlines the employment opportunities in fresh produce, and the implications for government policy.

Factors affecting Employment in Fresh Produce

Fresh produce remains one of the most labour intensive sectors within Australian agriculture. The nature of the work and the nature of the location of fresh produce production has a significant impact on the availability, quality and retention of a highly productive workforce. The two key factors are:

A. Nature of the work

- Often physical work outside in variable weather conditions
- Work periods and location dependent on the products being harvested

B. Nature of the locations

- Remote – difficult to travel, low level of service and accommodation
- Regional – competition from other industries, opportunities in capital cities
- Metropolitan – competition from other industry sectors for capable and skilled people

Opportunities

With collective employment of 22,000 individuals in fresh produce, the AFPA HR Reference Group has identified three discrete areas of employment opportunity:

1. Harvest

Business owners and HR departments are seeking motivated individuals for roles:

- Harvesting and Picking Produce
- Packing Produce
- Off Season Pruning and Plant Maintenance including planting

2. Technical Expertise

Business owners and HR departments are seeking highly capable individuals with skills/knowledge/expertise/demonstrated experience in:

- Farm Management, Agronomy and Irrigation
- Trade Skills – e.g. mechanic
- Machinery Operations

3. Middle Management

Business owners and HR Departments are seeking highly capable individuals with skills/knowledge/expertise/demonstrated experience in:

- Business Management
- Operations Management
- Strategy Development and Implementation



Policy Implications

Commercial operations and government policy and programs should integrate to deliver outcomes for business, government and our broader Australian society. For each discrete area of employment opportunity there are a range of levers for business and government:

1. Harvest

AFPA members have committed to the continued development of a permanent local workforce, creating opportunities for young Australians, improving the sector's employment practices and reputation, and developing practical solutions.

The Government's policy framework must support opportunities for people in local communities to work in fresh produce, continued expansion of the Seasonal Worker Program, and the ongoing availability of the Working Holiday Maker Program.

2. Technical Expertise

AFPA members have graduate programs to attract skilled young Australians into fresh produce, on the job training programs to support skills development, and recruitment policies to encourage diversity.

The Government's policy framework must support skills and training programs which ensure people are equipped to be job ready. The Government's immigration program must recognise the skills/experience/expertise required for the continued growth of the fresh produce industry, including through skilled migration agreements.

3. Middle Management

AFPA members are competing with all employers for Australia's middle management talent to help grow and develop their operations into thriving businesses. Fresh produce employers have recognised that the business growth opportunities are a key attribute of the industry for middle managers looking to expand their career.

The development of leaders for middle management roles in fresh produce is not unique to our industry. A collaborative approach between key industry employers and government will support the development of new approaches to develop industry leaders to support the continued growth of fresh produce and more broadly, Australian agriculture.

Next Steps

As the fastest growing agriculture sector, the Australian fresh produce industry will experience growth challenges that need to be overcome. Industry must be committed to the development of a long term permanent local workforce and a significant improvement in the sector's employment practices and reputation. A collaborative approach with Government to develop industry leaders, train and develop skilled specialists, and the continued development of a harvest workforce is a priority for the Australian Fresh Produce Alliance.

