



26 August 2022

Re: Federal Government's Jobs and Skills Summit

As the peak industry representative body for banana growers nationwide, the Australian Banana Growers' Council (ABGC) is working with growers to ensure a strong industry future. We hope the following information helps inform the understanding of issues in the banana industry and the critical areas requiring attention.

The banana industry is battling unprecedented times from increasing costs of production and ongoing biosecurity threats. These factors combined with diminished access to workers affect industry's ability to remain profitable and innovative.

Unlike many other horticulture industries, bananas are harvested 52 weeks a year (not seasonally), this means growers are in constant need of workers on farms. Recognised as the major economic driver and employer in Far North Queensland (mostly in the Kennedy and Leichardt electorates) the industry supports more than 18,000 full-time and part-time jobs (including the supply chain) in Australia. In fact, 95% of Australian bananas are grown in Far North Queensland.

Bananas is a well-established industry in Australia that has evolved over time in line with labour availability and the willingness of the local workforce to work on banana farms. Banana producing business have worked hard to balance their workforces with visa holders filling the gaps. Despite proactive recruitment, approximately half of the banana workforce simply cannot be met by Australian permanent residents, due to either location or the nature of the work.

The PALM scheme plays a vital role in complementing the local workforce, but is not sole solution for all agribusinesses to meet those shortages. Smaller-size banana farms use a higher proportion of Working Holiday Maker visa holders (backpackers) instead of PALM workers because they have irregular work and cannot guarantee hours.

To help remove barriers that impede growers meeting harvest needs and to secure the industry's future as a major employer and economic contributor in Far North Queensland we provide the following for consideration:

- Implement policies to support sustainable workforce growth: to attract, retain and upskill a range of horticulture workers at all skill levels (inexperienced, low skilled and skilled workers) to keep workers in regional areas and sustain communities.
- Adopt visa frameworks and pathways to incentivise workers to fill gaps in harvesting and packing roles in regional Australia and increase caps on seasonal workers.
- Recognise the PALM scheme is essential to supplement local workforce and is not the sole solution for all agri-businesses. Smaller-size banana farms use a higher proportion of Working Holiday Maker visa holders (backpackers) instead of PALM workers because they have irregular work and cannot guarantee hours.

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- Provide faster processing of visa applications through increased Departmental capacity, reduce costs, streamline services and better support returning seasonal workers to regional Australia.
- Retain WHM Visa 88 days on farm requirement until an equivalent has been developed to attract and support workers on farms.
- Reduce red tape and tax barriers to support farm worker accommodation options in regional Australia to address housing availability and affordability issues.
- Promote regional Australia and lifestyle benefits and promotion of farm work as a rewarding career pathway and pivotal role in the nation's food security.
- Resource and support enforcement of non-compliance laws to prosecute those who do the wrong thing and introduce a national labour-hire licencing scheme to protect businesses and workers from rogue operators.
- Implement workforce policies that provide incentives for Australians to develop a range of skills and access training for work in horticulture.
- Boost investment in business and workforce planning, access to professional advice and suite of resources on HR/IR issues, with continued investment in regional-based support services.
- Undertake workforce data collection, analysis and dissemination that shows commodity and regional requirements to assist with workforce planning and meaningful policy setting.
- Take workforce policy decisions out of the Trade Department and have responsibility with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

We hope the Federal Government will map out practical and achievable immediate and long-term solutions to address the ongoing problem of lack of workers in the banana industry.

Jim Pekin
CEO