



Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Submitted for: South Australian Dairyfarmers' Association (SADA)

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1. Executive summary

South Australia's dairy farmers need a skilled migration system that is fit-for-purpose, regionally responsive, and grounded in real workforce conditions. Dairy is a 365-day production system. When skilled roles cannot be filled, the impacts are immediate: animal welfare risks increase, milk quality and productivity decline, fatigue and safety risks rise, and farm businesses lose confidence to invest and innovate.

SADA's central message to the Committee is simple: where genuine regional shortages are persistent, skilled migration must be able to respond quickly, predictably, and through mainstream pathways.

SADA urges the Committee to recommend reforms that:

- Treat dairy as a critical regional industry where workforce continuity is essential to food supply and animal welfare.
- Align skilled migration settings to modern dairy job realities, recognising that contemporary dairy work is skilled, systems-based, and increasingly technology-enabled.
- Fix occupation recognition gaps so genuine skilled dairy roles can be accessed through standard programs — not only via complex, bespoke mechanisms.
- Reduce over-reliance on labour agreements and geographically constrained arrangements by strengthening occupation list coverage and streamlining standard pathways for bona fide roles.
- Prioritise stable regional settlement outcomes, including clear routes to permanence that support workforce retention, community integration, and business continuity.
- Coordinate migration settings with regional housing realities, supporting practical solutions (including safe, compliant employer-provided accommodation) that enable settlement and retention.

SADA also acknowledges the submissions made to this inquiry by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) and Australian Dairy Farmers (ADF) with Dairy Australia. Their evidence reinforces the practical reality facing agriculture and dairy: labour shortages are structural in many regions, and skilled migration settings must be better aligned to genuine workforce needs, clearer occupation recognition, and pathways that support stable regional settlement.

2. About SADA and the South Australian dairy context

The South Australian Dairyfarmers' Association (SADA) is the peak body representing South Australia's dairy farmers. SADA advocates for policies and programs that support a productive, sustainable, and competitive dairy industry, and works with government and industry partners to strengthen farm viability and regional communities.

South Australia's dairy sector is increasingly technology-enabled and has consolidated into fewer, larger and more complex farm systems. This evolution increases the need for a reliable pipeline of capable workers with practical and technical skills across animal husbandry, milking systems, compliance, safety, and environmental management.



3. Responses to the Terms of Reference

(a) The ongoing economic, social and cultural value of skilled migration to Australia

Skilled migration delivers direct economic value by enabling essential industries to operate at capacity, particularly in regions where domestic labour pools are persistently thin.

For dairy, the value is also fundamental to:

- Food security and continuity of supply: milk production is continuous and cannot be paused without cost and risk.
- Animal welfare: adequate skilled staffing is central to animal health, welfare monitoring, and timely response to issues.
- Regional resilience: skilled migrants and their families contribute to workforce participation, local spending, school enrolments, sporting clubs and community life — strengthening regional towns and service viability.

Skilled migration is not a substitute for training Australians; it is a necessary complement where shortages are structural and immediate.

(b) Effectiveness of current skilled migration settings in meeting state/territory needs, while recognising housing and infrastructure

SADA's view is that current settings are only partially effective for regional dairy.

Key issues include:

1. Occupation-list misalignment: dairy requires multiple skilled roles beyond farm owner/operator classifications, including experienced senior farm workers capable of supervising teams, managing herd routines, and operating complex milking systems.
2. Over-reliance on bespoke mechanisms: dependence on labour agreements and region-base arrangements indicates standard settings are not keeping pace with regional workforce realities.
3. Housing and infrastructure constraints: housing scarcity in many regional areas can undermine attraction and retention and must be recognised in program design; on-farm accommodation can be an enabling factor when safe and compliant.

SADA supports a migration system that is better targeted and more efficient, while encouraging coordinated regional planning and housing responses.

(c) Scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors

There is clear scope to better target skills gaps by aligning skilled migration settings to modern dairy job content and responsibilities.

SADA strongly supports:

- Recognising dairy roles as skilled across levels (not only farm proprietors), including senior dairy farm worker roles that carry significant operational responsibility.
- Ensuring skilled lists and program settings reflect the reality that dairy work requires judgement, technical competence, animal welfare capability, and increasing systems/data literacy.



Targeting should focus on genuine, evidenced shortages and support pathways that build capability and retention in regional Australia.

(d) Scope for skilled migration settings to more effectively support businesses, boost productivity and encourage innovation

Workforce certainty is a precondition for productivity, innovation and investment in dairy. When businesses cannot recruit reliably:

- productivity falls,
- technology adoption can stall (because systems still require capable operators),
- risk increases (fatigue, safety incidents, welfare incidents, quality issues), and
- businesses defer investment and expansion.

SADA advocates reforms that:

- provide clear, mainstream pathways for genuine skilled dairy roles, reducing reliance on complex multi-layered arrangements;
- encourage durable participation and retention through pathways to permanence that support stability; and
- support structured skills development so workers gain local context before progressing into management.

(e) Strategies to enhance public awareness and understanding of the role of skilled migration in Australia

Public confidence improves when policy is clearly explained and transparently targeted.

SADA supports:

- plain-language communication that distinguishes genuine skilled shortages from general labour-market pressure;
- practical case studies showing how skilled migrants support animal welfare, supply continuity, and regional communities; and
- clear public education that explains the skill content of modern farm work and the safeguards that protect workers and communities.

(f) Approaches taken in other countries with similar migration objectives

SADA supports learning from comparable jurisdictions that link hard-to-fill roles to clearer work-to-residence pathways to support long-term settlement, and recognise on-the-job experience and sector realities through tailored, integrity-focused programs. Australia should adopt best-practice elements of these approaches while maintaining robust integrity settings.

4. Recommendations

SADA recommends the Committee support reforms that make skilled migration more responsive to genuine shortages in critical regional industries:

1. Improve occupation recognition for dairy roles so settings reflect modern job content and responsibility.
2. Reduce reliance on bespoke pathways by strengthening access through standard programs for bona fide skilled roles, with appropriate safeguards and compliance.



3. Prioritise durable regional settlement, including credible pathways to permanence that support retention and community integration.
4. Support structured workforce development (safety, welfare, environmental management, and local systems knowledge) to build capability and progression.
5. Coordinate migration settings with regional housing responses, recognising housing scarcity and the role of safe, compliant employer-provided accommodation.
6. Invest in public confidence measures, including transparent reporting and case studies demonstrating additive value in essential regional industries.

5. Closing

South Australia's dairy farmers are asking for a skilled migration system that reflects reality: persistent shortages, genuinely skilled roles, and the need for stable regional settlement. When settings are right, skilled migration strengthens productivity, supports innovation, protects animal welfare, and underpins food supply chains. When settings lag, the cost is felt immediately in output, risk, and business viability.