



**Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Inquiry into
The Value of Skilled Migration to Australia**

**Submission from Regional Development Australia
Goldfields Esperance
(RDA Goldfields Esperance)**

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For Inquiries please contact:

Sharon Henderson
Director
Regional Development Australia
Goldfields Esperance



An Australian Government Initiative



GOLDFIELDS ESPERANCE

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Inquiry Terms of Reference

The Joint Standing Committee on Migration shall inquire into and report on Australia's skilled migration program, with reference to:

- a) The ongoing economic, social and cultural value of skilled migration to Australia;
- b) The effectiveness of current skilled migration settings in meeting the current and future needs of the states and territories, while recognising the ongoing need for housing and infrastructure;
- c) The scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors to improve services that benefit Australian communities;
- d) The scope for skilled migration settings to more effectively support Australian businesses, boost productivity and encourage innovation;
- e) Strategies to enhance public awareness and understanding of the role of skilled migration in Australia; and
- f) Approaches taken in other countries with similar migration objectives.

1. INTRODUCTION AND SUBMISSION OVERVIEW

Regional Development Australia Goldfields Esperance (RDA Goldfields Esperance) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program.

The Goldfields–Esperance region is one of Australia's most strategically important and economically significant regions, responsible for major contributions to mining, critical minerals, agriculture, logistics, energy generation, research, and emerging renewable industries.

Despite this, the region faces persistent and severe workforce shortages that limit economic capacity, undermine service delivery, and constrain community wellbeing.

The region's economic profile highlights its importance:

Population: 58,134

Jobs Supported: 37,696

Annual Output: \$39.963 billion

In contrast with this remarkable output, the region has experienced long-term population stagnation and decline in several towns. Workforce shortages cut across every sector, from mining to childcare, GPs to hospitality, logistics to construction. Skilled migration is therefore essential to sustaining the region's growth, productivity, and community resilience.

RDA Goldfields Esperance serves as the Regional Certifying Body (RCB) for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (Provisional) Visa (Subclass 494) and works closely with employers under the Goldfields Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA). This submission draws on extensive regional evidence, employer feedback, labour market analysis, and economic development planning.

2. ABOUT REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA GOLDFIELDS ESPERANCE

RDA Goldfields Esperance is part of the national RDA network funded by the Australian Government. Our role is to:

- identify regional priorities and strategic opportunities,
- support investment attraction and project development,
- facilitate collaboration between local, state and federal stakeholders,
- provide an evidence-based regional voice to government, and
- strengthen local economies, liveability and community resilience.

We work across ten local government areas spanning mining centres, coastal communities, remote Aboriginal communities and vast pastoral and agricultural districts.

3. REGIONAL CONTEXT & SKILLED MIGRATION NEEDS

3.1 Geography and Population

The Goldfields-Esperance region now covers approximately **955,276 km²** following the inclusion of the Shire of Wiluna in 2021. It is one of the largest regions in Australia by land area.

Despite enormous economic output, the resident population is small and has declined:

- In 2014, the region (then 771,276 km²) was home to about **61,400 people**.
- By 2025, the region is home to **58,134 people**, supporting **37,696 jobs** and generating **\$39.963 billion** in annual economic output.

The region's population is historically cyclical and closely tied to commodity cycles, project activity and liveability factors such as housing and services.

3.2 Economic Profile and Sector Drivers

Key sectors include:

- **Mining and Resources** – gold, nickel, cobalt, lithium, rare earths, iron ore and emerging vanadium and magnetite projects.
- **Agriculture** – broadacre grains (wheat, barley, canola, oats, lupins), sheep and beef, with the Esperance zone one of WA's most productive grain regions.
- **Transport and Logistics** – interstate road, rail and port systems, including the Port of Esperance and key east-west corridors.
- **Tourism and Cultural Industries** – coastal tourism in Esperance, outback and desert tourism along the Outback Way, and a thriving Aboriginal arts sector in the Western Desert.
- **Emerging Industries** – bioenergy and low-carbon fuels, renewable energy and hydrogen, and advanced processing for critical minerals.

The economy has nearly **doubled in output** since 2016 (from around \$19 billion to almost \$40 billion), yet the population has fallen. This mismatch drives severe pressure on infrastructure, services and local government capacity.

3.3 Long-Term Regional Vision and the 2016 Blueprint

The **Goldfields-Esperance Regional Investment Blueprint (2016)** set a long-term vision to 2050, focussed on:

- **Enhancing regional living** – improving liveability and services to attract and retain population and workforce.
- **Enabling infrastructure** – transport, energy, digital and utilities as foundations for growth and diversification.
- **Fostering an innovative economy** – building on comparative advantages to diversify into value-added industries and new sectors.

3.4 Mining and Resources Workforce Crisis

Western Australia faces a mining labour shortfall of approximately **10,000 workers**, projected to exceed **11,000 by 2029**. In the Goldfields:

- Major gold, nickel*, rare earths, and critical minerals projects are expanding.
- Operational disruptions, reduced equipment utilisation, and maintenance backlogs are common.
- Skilled migration is the only viable pathway to fill immediate shortages.

The sector also faces:

- Wage escalation >20%
- FIFO mental health and retention concerns
- Delays in project commissioning
- Safety risk due to inexperienced or insufficient staffing

Skilled migration is and has been a core enabler for delivering major projects since 2020 including:

- Northern Star's Super Pit expansion
- Mungari Mill expansion
- Kalgoorlie Rare Earths Processing Facility
- Wingellina Nickel-Cobalt Project (*pending market recovery)
- Goongarrie Nickel Project (*pending market recovery)
- Western Green Energy Hub (70 GW green energy precinct)

Without migration, these projects faced or face delays or downsizing.

3.5 Healthcare and GP Shortages

Rural health workforce shortages are acute:

- Some shires spend up to \$350,000 per year to secure a single GP
- 53% of non-metropolitan LGAs fund GP services
- Rural communities experience far poorer health outcomes
- GP shortages reduce workforce participation and community resilience

A skilled migration system that supports rural health is essential.

3.6 Childcare and Education

Critical gaps in early childhood educators restrict workforce participation:

- Insufficient childcare places limit parent employment
- Childcare operators cannot find qualified staff
- DAMA concessions and skilled migration are crucial to sustain services

3.7 Construction and Housing Workforce

The region faces:

- Near-zero vacancy rates (0.2–1.0%)
- Limited land supply for development

- Projects stalled due to lack of tradies and power allocation

Skilled migration in construction, civil works, electrical, plumbing, and surveying is vital to unlock housing supply.

3.8 Transport, Logistics and Agriculture

The region relies on:

- Heavy vehicle operators
- Mechanics and diesel fitters
- Agricultural technicians
- Seasonal and permanent farm workers

With Esperance Port handling millions of tonnes of grain, nickel, iron ore and fuel, labour shortages directly affect national supply chains.

4. DAMA AND 494 VISA: REGIONAL TOOLS THAT WORK

The **Goldfields DAMA**, extended to 2026, includes **145 occupations**, with concessions for skills, English language, salary, and age. It has:

- Enabled small and medium businesses to survive
- Supported hospitals, aged care, schools, hotels, logistics, trades, and mining support industries
- Allowed regional areas to recruit for roles not on national occupation lists

The **SESR 494 visa**:

- Requires RCB advice (RDA GE)
- Provides a pathway to permanent residency
- Helps employers fill skilled positions that have exceeded local labour market capacity

However, the scale of regional labour shortages has outgrown current migration settings.

5. RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

5.1 TOR (a): Ongoing economic, social and cultural value of skilled migration

Skilled migration underpins:

1: Economic Value

- Sustains a regional economy producing **\$39.963B** annually.
- Maintains Australia's gold, nickel, rare earths and critical minerals supply.
- Supports major export chains through Esperance Port.

2: Social Value

- Provides GPs, nurses, childcare workers, teachers, aged care staff.
- Keeps essential services functioning.
- Enables families to stay in regional communities.

3: Cultural Value

- The Goldfields has a deep multicultural heritage dating back to the early gold rush.
- Migrants enrich regional identity, diversity, and resilience.

5.2 TOR (b): Effectiveness of current skilled migration settings

Current settings are not effective for regional Australia due to:

- Processing delays
- Outdated occupation lists
- Salary thresholds that do not reflect regional wages
- Limited recognition of regional shortages
- Lack of integration with housing capacity

The DAMA is effective, but not sufficient in scale.

5.3 TOR (c): Targeting skills gaps more effectively

Key shortages:

- Mining technicians, engineers, operators
- Construction trades
- Early childhood educators
- Aged care, disability care, GPs
- Hospitality and tourism
- Transport and logistics
- Agriculture and agritech

Migration should be targeted at these sectors with real-time data and flexible concessions.

5.4 TOR (d): Supporting businesses, boosting productivity, encouraging innovation

Skilled migration:

- Reduces project delays
- Brings specialised technical expertise
- Supports SMEs that cannot attract local workers
- Enables automation, AI adoption, remote operations
- Supports new industries (bioenergy, hydrogen, critical minerals refinement)

Without skilled migrants, productivity drops 5–15%.

5.5 TOR (e): Enhancing public awareness of skilled migration's role

Strategies:

- National awareness campaigns
- Regional storytelling
- Transparent reporting
- Anti-misinformation initiatives

Communities must understand that migration fills jobs that otherwise remain empty.

5.6 TOR (f): International approaches

Canada, New Zealand, and the UK offer:

- Faster processing
- Regional nomination pathways
- Clear settlement incentives
- Flexible occupation lists
- Stronger permanent residency options

Australia should adopt similar regional pathways.

6. CONCLUSION

The Goldfields–Esperance region is essential to Western Australia’s and Australia’s economic prosperity. Skilled migration is fundamental to its workforce capacity, essential services, and future growth.

The existing migration system does not adequately meet regional needs. Reform is urgently required to ensure:

- A modern, flexible, region-responsive migration program
- Alignment with housing and infrastructure investment
- Acceleration of pathways for essential workers
- Support for the DAMA and SESR visa system
- Recognition of the national importance of regional workforce supply

RDA Goldfields Esperance stands ready to support the Committee and government in designing a skilled migration system that strengthens regional Australia and sustains national economic prosperity.

CONTACT

Sharon Henderson
Director
Regional Development Australia Goldfields Esperance