

Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
Answers to questions on notice
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Portfolio

Inquiry: Northern Australia Workforce Development

Question No: IQ23-000134

Hearing Date: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Division/Agency: Agricultural Policy Division

Topic: Post Hearing Questions

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Question Type: Written

- 1) What initiatives does the Australian Government have in place to support Northern Australia to make the most of emerging economic and business growth opportunities?
- 2) Please provide detail of 3 major policies designed by your department/agency to have the greatest positive impact on workforce development in Northern Australia.
- 3) In your portfolio areas, what were the biggest problems historically affecting workforce development in Northern Australia, and how do these compare to today?
- 4) How do you measure the effectiveness of the policies your department/agency has implemented and will implement for Northern Australia, and whether they are fit-for-purpose?
- 5) How do your policies recognise differences between different parts of Northern Australia – for example, regional hubs versus remote communities?
- 6) What programs has the Australian Government introduced and supported to encourage more Australians and migrants to live in the north?
- 7) How does your department/agency consult and co-design programs with Northern Australians?
 - How are you working with remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?
- 8) What industries falling within your portfolios are facing the most challenges attracting and retaining staff?
- 9) How do levels of government currently collaborate to address issues in Northern Australia?
 - How can collaboration and coordination between levels of government be improved to address workforce development issues in Northern Australia?
- 10) How do problems in workforce development in Northern Australia reflect Australia-wide issues and how are they unique to Northern Australia?
- 11) Which industries and sectors has the Australian Government identified as having the potential to create lasting employment and long-term, local economic benefits for the north?

Answer:

1. Through the Jobs and Skills Summit held in September 2022, the Australian Government brought together government, employers, unions and the broader community to agree on initiatives to help build a bigger, better trained and more productive workforce, boost real wages and living standards, and create more opportunities for more Australians. Some of the initiatives agreed at the Summit included an additional \$1 billion in joint Federal-State funding for fee-free TAFE in 2023, a one-off income credit for Age Pensioners, modernising Australia's workplace relations laws, amending the Fair Work Act, improving access to jobs and training pathways for women, First Nations people, regional Australians and culturally and linguistically diverse people, an increase in the permanent Migration Program ceiling, and providing additional funding to resolve the visa backlog. These initiatives will help Northern Australia make the most of emerging economic and business growth opportunities.

2. The Indigenous Ranger Biosecurity Program (IRBP) is a key contributor to the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) surveillance program and through the IRBP, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) partners with 65 Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander ranger groups on a fee-for-service basis to undertake biosecurity surveillance activities including plant host mapping, insect trapping, aquatic biosecurity, community animal health monitoring, and logistical support for plant and animal surveys.

The IRBP also provides additional economic opportunities for First Nations communities across Northern Australia through a bespoke traineeship (Indigenous Biosecurity Traineeship) to help provide career pathways into biosecurity and grants to assist businesses to capitalise on biosecurity business opportunities.

The department is also implementing several measures targeted at attracting Australians to the agriculture sector to support its workforce needs. These measures include:

- AgATTRACT which aims to shift perceptions of agricultural work and showcase the diverse career opportunities on offer through a range of programs including the AgCAREERSTART pilot;
- AgFair which supports agricultural employers to adopt best practice modern workforce management and planning to attract and retain employees; and
- Kids to Farms which aims to educate kids about where and how their food and fibre is grown, to gain an understanding of the role and importance of agriculture to Australia's way of life, regional communities, and economy.

The government is also implementing several whole-of-economy measure to address workforce needs which will benefit Northern Australia, including for local and migrant workers. Further detail on these initiatives is provided on pages 7-14 of the department's submission on Northern Australia Workforce Development.

3. Northern Australia has a set of unique features and systemic issues that affect the environment for investment and growth. They include small populations, weak connectivity to external markets and high dependency on a small range of primary sector activities, a workforce dominated by lower skilled workers, higher unit costs to deliver public services, and extreme and unpredictable weather. Further detail on some of these issues is provided on page 7 of the department's submission on Northern Australia Workforce Development.
4. The department's programs in Northern Australia are administered under relevant Commonwealth financial management frameworks and guided by applicable national biosecurity and export facilitation policies and strategies and associated effectiveness measures. Delivery strategies are implemented in consultation with a range of key stakeholders including State and Territory governments, community and industry representatives and relevant technical subject matter experts and include consideration of the unique operating environments, industry priorities and community requirements across the North. Feedback regarding the extent to which the department's programs align with priorities and objectives of stakeholders is considered through the consultation forums, stakeholder surveys and informal engagements underpinning the department's key operating platforms in Northern Australia. In particular the Northern Australia Biosecurity Framework, the *Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area Biosecurity Strategy* and the Indigenous Rangers Biosecurity Program.

5. The department understands the geography and climate of Northern Australia requires different strategies to workforce development and management to address the challenges in both regional and remote communities. The department does this by actively engaging and working with stakeholders in these areas. Further details about the department's engagement with stakeholders are provided in response to questions 4 and 7.
6. Migration plays an important role in addressing Australia's agricultural labour challenges. Australia relies on temporary migrant workers to meet seasonal agricultural workforce gaps due to the peak labour demands that occur around harvest periods.

The government is implementing several whole-of-economy measures in relation to migrant workers to address workforce needs including for the agriculture sector, including increasing the permanent migration cap, expanding the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, increasing the duration of Post Study Work rights for international students, implementing the recommendations of the Migrant Workers' Taskforce report, and reviewing Australia's migration system. These initiatives generally have a national focus; however, they are applicable to and have benefits for Northern Australia. Further details on these initiatives can be found on page 10 of the department's submission on Northern Australia Workforce Development.

7. The department has established a range of stakeholder engagement and consultation forums to facilitate co-design of its operational programs and appropriately align with objectives and aspirations of industry, community and traditional owner groups across Northern Australia. The department's Northern Australia Biosecurity Framework (NABF) Reference Group provides strategic advice on, and support for, a collaborative approach to the delivery of biosecurity in Northern Australia; its role is to identify common biosecurity delivery priorities across governments and agricultural industries to ensure that the Australian Government's biosecurity surveillance effort for Northern Australia is appropriately targeted to risk, and effectively aligned with other stakeholder effort. Membership includes DAFF, Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland Governments, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, Plant Health Australia and Animal Health Australia. The NABF oversees the implementation of the Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy (NABS) which aims to boost Northern Australia's ability to prepare for, and manage, the growing and dynamic biosecurity risk profile. The NABS was funded by the Australian Government in October 2022 with \$11.1 million over 2 years; while only recently commenced the effectiveness of the NABS will be subject to independent evaluation for a review of benefits. Frameworks supporting the Indigenous Rangers Biosecurity Program and the *Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area Biosecurity Strategy* include mechanisms to facilitate participation by northern community representatives (including Indigenous ranger groups and traditional owners) to ensure appropriate alignment of department programs with community priorities where feasible accounting for the department's resource profile and scope of responsibility.

The department's engagement with remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are described in the department's submission on Northern Australia Workforce Development. Key elements in the department's engagement approach include pro-active and targeted employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to key biosecurity roles based across Northern Australia, contracted service delivery by Indigenous rangers, and investments in biosecurity training and grant programs targeting Indigenous rangers and businesses through the Indigenous Rangers Biosecurity Program. Measures to expand the current scope of engagement and participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander employees and groups in Northern Australia and nationally are under development through the department's First Nations Platform referred to in the submission.

8. Workforce shortages are a significant issue facing many industries across Australia, including agriculture, fisheries, and forestry industries in Northern Australia.

Border restrictions during COVID-19 significantly affected Australia's temporary migrant workforce, leading to a decline in workers for the agriculture sector. These impacts have mostly affected the horticulture industry.

An ABARES survey showed the total number of workers used by Australian horticulture farms declined around 20% from 2019-20 to 2021-22 largely due to the reduction in the number of migrant contract workers, mostly working holiday makers. Overall horticulture outputs remained relatively steady due to a range of adaptations made by many horticulture producers during this period. Visa numbers are growing since the reopening of borders, with Working Holiday Maker numbers close to returning to pre-Covid levels and the highest ever number of Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme workers in Australia.

9. The department works across government to ensure agricultural issues and concerns are considered in broader government initiatives and programs. This includes on issues in relation to workforce development, with the department working closely with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations on key programs such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.

State and Territory governments are engaged on agricultural workforce issues through several mechanisms including via the Agriculture Ministers' Meeting (AMM) and the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee (AGSOC). At the 20 July 2022 AMM meeting, agricultural workforce issues were identified as a nationwide challenge that ministers agreed to tackle together, with workforce matters a regular item for AMM meetings.

Please refer to the response to question 7 for further information on how the department collaborates and engages on issues in Northern Australia, including on the Northern Australia Biosecurity Framework.

10. Workforce shortages are a significant issue facing many industries across Australia, including agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries. Labour and skills shortages have long been an issue but have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where there was a reduced number of migrant workers and restrictions placed on the movement of Australian workers. In addition to workforce shortages industry wide, agriculture is competing with other sectors to attract from the existing pool of workers. Specific challenges to workforce development and management in Northern Australia include low populations, limited connectivity to external markets, high costs of providing services and varying infrastructure.

11. Agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries make a significant contribution to many regional economies, including in Northern Australia. Beef is a key industry in Northern Australia, with red meat (mainly beef) production worth \$4.9 billion or 60% of the total value of agricultural production in Northern Australia. Other key agricultural industries in Northern Australia include sugar cane, bananas, mangoes and melons. Further detail on key commodity industries in Northern Australia is provided on pages 5-6 of the department's submission on Northern Australia Workforce Development.