



WWOOF Pty Ltd

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17th October 2015

The Hon Peter Dutton MP
Minister for Immigration and Border Protection

Dear Minister,

My name is Traci Wilson-Brown; I am the Office Manager for WWOOF Pty Ltd. Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) is a globally-recognised volunteer exchange program. WWOOF volunteers (WWOOFers) volunteer on 2700 Organic WWOOF Host Farms all over Australia in exchange for their meals and board, usually living with WWOOF Host families, where they improve their English and gain skills while learning about organic farming methods and Australian life.

On the 10th of September, as part of the Australian Women in Agriculture Delegation to Canberra, WWOOF Host Carolyn Hill and I met with Nicole Masters, Chief of Staff to Senator Cash and Mike Ferguson from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) to discuss issues concerning the immediate and adverse impact the changes to visa rules are having on WWOOF Australia, WWOOFer volunteers, WWOOF Host members as well as the organic sector and the Australian rural communities in which they live and work.

Senator Cash's press release of 1 May 2015 as to why the changes were necessary states:

"...the changes address a concern that some employers are exploiting the second Working Holiday visa initiative by encouraging Working Holiday visa holders to work for less than the minimum wage."

The press release goes on to state that this will not unduly affect volunteers:

"In recognition of the many legitimate and worthwhile agencies that employ volunteer workers to deliver valuable community services, Working Holiday visa holders will still be able to perform volunteer work should they wish to do so. The work will simply not count towards eligibility for a second visa."

On the contrary, in our experience the visa changes have immediately and devastatingly affected our volunteer base, with a huge drop in volunteers and the resultant flow on to our Hosts.

We understand and support DIBP's efforts to deal with organised crime and exploitation of travellers; however the unintended consequences of this change are the dire impacts on our members. We consider our members to be the very "legitimate and worthwhile agencies that employ volunteer workers to deliver valuable community services", who are neither involved nor implicated in this exploitation. As such we would appreciate the opportunity to work with you to find a way forward to allow longer term WWOOFing to continue to be an approved activity for the second Working Holiday (WH) visa extension.

The introduction of paid work with pay slips which DIBP has initiated will not solve this problem, rather it will force it underground. What it will do is remove the immeasurable gifts that voluntary exchange makes possible, through organisations such as WWOOF Australia.

To summarise and update the unintended consequences for our members as presented in the WWOOF Issues Paper:

For WWOOF Australia — an immediate 39% downturn in WWOOF volunteers joining our program in May 2015, and 35% in June 2015. One staff member has been laid off as a direct consequence in a remote rural area where there are very few employment prospects; others have had their hours reduced and may also be laid off if this trend is not reversed. Instead of people calling to join, we were inundated with phone calls from Hosts and volunteers concerned about the changes. (See also the attached statistics for the 2014/15 year.)

For WWOOF Host members — a significant number of small scale organic farms* do not generate sufficient year-to-year income to financially remunerate paid workers. These small scale enterprises are dependent on long term WWOOFer support to help in the day-to-day as well as long term viability of their farms. These Hosts are now reporting that they are no longer being contacted by WWOOFers, many of these Hosts had WWOOFers booked in for months in advance and now have no WWOOFers and none booked in for the future. They are struggling with their workload and becoming increasingly depressed, seeing no alternative future other than to sell their farms if this



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rule is not altered.

* 80% of WWOOF Host farms fit into this category. (WWOOF Australia Statistics)

For WWOOFer volunteers — without the enticement of the WH visa extension, *many WH visa holders will not join the WWOOF scheme, leaving the majority of WWOOFers only staying for a short time with each Host. Many WH visa holders will struggle to find 88 days of paid work as they have little to no experience with farm work, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. WWOOF Australia offers protection from exploitation, with a proven track record of positive outcomes, clear Host Guidelines, WWOOFer Guidelines and complaints procedures.

* Approximately 4000 WWOOFers each year volunteer on long term placements with WWOOF Hosts to qualify for their second WH visa. (DIBP will have statistics to verify this, we have been told by DIBP staff that approximately 1/3 of all applications include some form of volunteer work.)

For rural Australia — a significant drop in WWOOFers across rural Australia will not only result in a potential annual loss to these regions, but the loss of 4000 WWOOFers could cost these regions up to *\$12.8 million per annum as well as the demise of a number of small scale organic farms and the flow-on effect this will have on these communities. (*See full WWOOF Issues Paper (Book), submitted in 10 September meeting: Value of WWOOFing-12000 WWOOFers spends \$38.5M, 4000 spend \$12.8M).

I have attached the latest statistics for WWOOF members for 2014/15, showing an overall 27.4% fall in WWOOFers (volunteers) joining compared to the previous financial year. The Minister's press release on May 1 2015 coincided with a 39% drop in WWOOF volunteers joining WWOOF in the month of May 2015 and a 35% drop in June 2015 compared to 2014 figures for these months.

As stakeholders WWOOF Australia was not consulted by DIBP prior to the May 1 announcement and the unintended consequences of the change has already had, and will continue to have, a devastating effect on the WWOOF Australia program, the Australian Organics industry, small rural businesses, communities and travellers.

We propose maintaining the second Working Holiday visa for long-term WWOOFers and WWOOF Hosts. In consultation with the Department, we also propose a one year trial of the attached Volunteer Pay Slip, with a joint review at the end of this period to assess its effectiveness. As such, we see this as a solution that could be workable for all stakeholders.

We believe the WWOOFers working towards their second WH visa form a different clientele to those WWOOFers undertaking short term work as part of their WH visa. They also differ from those individuals seeking paid employment while in Australia on a WH visa.

As such there are three distinct groups of people to be considered here and they need to be treated accordingly.

1. Long Term WWOOFers — These people are fully aware that their work and stay is voluntary from the outset. They choose this option to gain from the experience of living and working on an Australian farm.

* The skills they gain are not learnt in a two week stay, nor is the cultural exchange as effective in a short time period. It takes more than two weeks to orientate WWOOFers from overseas in terms of understanding language, adjusting to climate, customs, internet (or not), cultural differences, foods, appropriate clothing, travel, work they are happy to do or learn, OH & S requirements and safe working practices. Then to learn and integrate skills requires practice over time. For example, one does not learn management of an organic vineyard in a few weeks - even if English is your first language. This is a gradual process, which is part of the strength of the WWOOF program and why this group of international visitors chooses WWOOFing to work towards their second WH visa. They want the unique experience that volunteering offers, while at the same time working towards another visa.

* This is a two way process and a significant number of WWOOFER Hosts rely on this long term voluntary assistance to stay viable. It is a win/win situation.

2. Short term WWOOFers — Those WWOOF travellers on first or second WH visas who are wanting to stay two or three weeks with a WWOOF host are after a different experience. They constitute a different group of people to long term WWOOFers and paid workers. Some see this as a way to gain a free holiday along the way, in exchange for a few hours work to help out with board and lodging while experiencing parts of Australia and Australian lifestyles that are off the beaten track.

* These WWOOFers are unaffected by this change as they are not applying for a visa extension.



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3. **Paid workers** — The final group of people who undertake paid work on their Working Holiday Visa are after just that - paid work, and this is their priority.

* Since a large portion of WWOOF hosts are not in a position to pay wages (for reasons mentioned above), they do not join WWOOF or contact WWOOF Hosts. They are a different group of people with differing aims and aspirations. They undertake paid work, which may be to gain their Second Holiday Working Visa or not.

* These people may be advantaged by this change as they should now be issued with pay slips if they are applying for their second WH visa.

We understand that Malcolm Turnbull is eager to re-establish Australia as a tourist destination and much is spent on marketing Australia to the world as a clean and green destination. The long term WWOOF experience is a "clean and green" positive experience of Australia, which establishes ongoing ties between the WWOOF Hosts and WWOOFers on an international scale. In so doing Australia is spoken well of in other countries and becomes a place that people want visit to go WWOOFing. Maintaining good international relations with other countries is a major advantage of the WWOOF program. WWOOFing is different to coming to do paid work where the reward is money, rather than life changing experiences.

The opportunity to work towards a second WH visa is a unique aspect of a stay in Australia and WWOOF volunteers and Hosts have supported this initiative since its inception in 2006. Abolishing the second WH visa eligibility for WWOOFers and WWOOF Hosts withdraws the incentive for travellers to experience this aspect of Australia first hand by staying long term on Australian organic farms. Putting some of these farms out of business as a result is surely a backwards step in International relations.

We believe the WWOOF Australia program provides the cultural exchange which is the stated objective of the WH Visa, bringing international culture to rural and remote Australian families and their communities. Participants leave with new skills and a deeper understanding and appreciation of Australian culture and people. To this end, to comply with the requirement for pay slips, we have created a Volunteer Pay Slip / Work Record (attached) to provide a daily and/or weekly record of WWOOF volunteer work to ensure there is accurate documentation of time spent volunteering and the type of work done on each eligible Host property.

During our meeting we presented Nicole Masters and Mike Ferguson with a copy of the WWOOF Australia Book, the WWOOF Issues Paper and Appendix each and a printed copy of the WWOOF Petition with comments and around 5000 signatures (approximately 4500 via change.org and 500 signatures collected on paper); there are currently 4906 signatures on this petition on-line. During our meeting, Nicole and Mike requested some additional information be sent to them, this was sent on Friday the 18th September 2015, and I have attached this additional information to this email to ensure that you also have this as we have not yet had a response from your office.

We understand Mike Ferguson is now part of your staff in DIBP, but Nicole Masters will continue in her role as Chief of Staff for Senator Cash. In light of this change of staff can we confirm that this information has been presented to you?

We look forward to discussing the way forward with this issue at your earliest opportunity.

Yours faithfully

Traci Wilson-Brown
Office Manager

CC:

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP: Prime Minister

The Hon Warren Truss MP: Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development

The Hon Barnaby Joyce MP: Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources

Senator the Hon Fiona Nash: Minister for Rural Health

Senator the Hon Richard Colbeck: Minister for Tourism and International Education

Hon Darren Chester MP: Member for Gippsland, Assistant Minister for Defence



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Mr Ken O'Dowd MP: Member for Flynn, Qld

Hon Anthony Albanese MP: Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, Shadow Minister for Tourism

Hon Joel Fitzgibbon MP: Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Shadow Minister for Rural Affairs

Hon Richard Marles MP: Shadow Minister for Immigration and Border Protection

Senator Richard Di Natale: Leader of the Australian Greens

Senator Larissa Waters: Co-Deputy Leader of the Australian Greens

Senator Sarah Hanson-Young: Australian Greens Spokesperson for Immigration

Senator Janet Rice: Australian Greens

Senator Rachel Siewert: Australian Greens Whip

Senator Peter Whish-Wilson: Australian Greens

Ms Cathy McGowan AO, MP: Independent Member for Indi

Senator Ricky Muir, Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party

Cindy McLeish MP: Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Communities & Volunteers

Mike Ferguson, DIBP

Liz Brennan, AWiA President

Adam Willson: Chair, Organic Federation of Australia