



BOWEN GUMLU  
GROWERS ASSOCIATION INC.  
*Collectively we grow*

## **Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker Program**

*Committee Secretary*

### ***Joint Standing Committee on Migration***

PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2020

To the Committee Secretary, Joint Standing Committee on Migration;

### **Submission in response to Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry - Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker program**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker Program.

This submission is made for and on behalf of the Bowen Gumlu Growers Association. The Bowen Gumlu Growers (BGGGA) Association represents Australia's largest winter vegetable growing region, located in the Whitsunday region of North Queensland. BGGGA serves as the first point of contact by utilising our on the ground grower and key industry stakeholder connections. BGGGA provide a presence and a voice on horticultural issues while facilitating & promoting key industry events & information.

Our district sends fruit and vegetables to both the domestic and export markets with a \$460 million farm gate value. The region is renowned for its production of mangoes, capsicums, tomatoes, cucurbits including cucumber and zucchini as well as chilis, beans pumpkin and egg fruit. In total, 253,955 tonnes of produce was harvested in 2018. Production currently takes place over approximately 10,000 hectares, with the potential to expand in a further 40,000 hectares within the region.

- **The value of the program to Australia's economy, including tourism, health care and agriculture sectors;**

A large percentage of farms in the Bowen Gumlu region employ Working Holiday Makers as they provide a flexible solution to fill seasonal vacancies for picking and packing work. There are not enough local workers to fill the 3500 positions needed on an annual basis across the Bowen Gumlu region.

- **The ongoing impact of COVID-19 nationally and internationally on the program;**

WHM's utilise farm work (88 days) to access a 2<sup>nd</sup> year visa in Australia, many of whom return to work on the same farm each season. The 408 temporary activity visa does not allow workers to continue to accrue their 88 days, which will result in WHMs returning at the end of their 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year visas. There are only 85,000 WHM's in Australia from a previous figure of 210,000. Approx. 30% of these workers access Agricultural work. The pool of workers is significantly smaller and will not be topped up until the international borders are open. Some regions are already reporting shortages of workers and as more WHM's return home this issue will increase, as the other growing regions start to compete for the same workers. There are only 8,000 SWP (Pacific Islander) workers in Australia, which is a cohort that is also often utilised by growers in the Bowen Gumlu region in large numbers. There are many WHM's in Victoria, who had planned to travel to Queensland to uptake seasonal farm work to get their 88 days, these workers are now unable to enter Qld for the foreseeable future.

- **The potential economic impacts on regional economies due to the disruptions of access to Working Holiday Makers relied upon especially for the agricultural and tourism sectors; and the capacity, if any, for Australian's made unemployed by COVID-19 to fill the labour shortage;**

Growers rely heavily on the WHM's to ensure that they can meet the demand for fresh produce from the major supermarkets and major produce markets in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. There will be significant economic impacts locally if growers are unable to find enough workers to pick and pack this vital commodity. Growers will either choose to reduce their production levels where possible, or produce will be left to rot in the paddocks, this would therefore reduce the need for WHMs or Australian workers to fill harvest vacancies. Over many years there have been initiatives to increase the uptake of unemployed Australians into seasonal horticulture work, which have not been successful due to the seasonality of the work available and other barriers relating to perceptions of the nature of the work and the suitability of Australian workers. Australian workers need to have year-round employment in order to meet their financial obligations in a society where many own their own homes (or aspire to) and both parents typically work full-time. Our region is set to be impacted significantly by the downturn in international visitation, therefore, many retail, tourism and hospitality workers will be unemployed and seeking other opportunities. There is a possibility that a proportion of these workers would be suitable to take up horticulture work. However, there are a number of barriers including transport (Airlie Beach is 50 mins drive away, no public transport) and perceptions of employers as to the suitability of this cohort of workers and the workers perceptions of the type of work being offered and rate of pay. It is noted that a fund has been announced under the Harvest Labour Services to support industry collaboration to connect Australian workers to seasonal horticulture work, which BGGGA intend to prioritise to trial some innovative measures. It is still likely, even with a successful program, that there would be a shortfall of workers in

Bowen and Gumlu and indeed across Australia without a migration component of the workforce availability solution or a widening of the search for Australian workers to include all of Australia rather than just our locally unemployed or underemployed. JobKeeper has enabled many workers to stay connected to their place of employment, which has benefited the businesses and workers to get through the last 5 months. This has curtailed the number of locals applying for seasonal farm work.

- **The extent to which existing visa criteria and conditions related to Working Holiday Makers are still adequate and appropriate to address the purpose of this program, including cultural exchange and creating job opportunities for Australians;**

There is evidence to suggest that the use of the current WHM visa has potentially moved beyond the use of this visa to fill a seasonal gap of unskilled workers and growers are needing to use these workers for a larger percentage of work undertaken on farm and for more skilled work. The cohort we are attracting are not generally matching the needs of the industry as they are predominately here to undertake a holiday (funded through working), therefore there is a miss-match of expectations from both sides.

The WHM visa is valuable to the horticulture sector for what it was originally intended for, but further analysis is required of what the future needs of the industry are to attract semi-skilled and skilled workers to the industry as well as unskilled labour. A good example of an approach that has seen good results is the uptake of the Seasonal Worker Program SWP and Pacific Labour Scheme PLS and a more local Whitsundays solution being the Japanese Agri Knowledge Sharing project attracting Japanese Agricultural graduates into the region to gain practical horticulture paid work for 12 months on the WHM visa. There is potential to expand this program to target gap year students in Australia, particularly those with an interest in an Agricultural career.

- The extent to which the program can support economic recovery in regional Australia; and

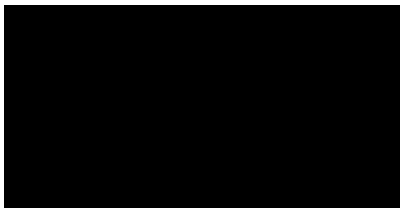
WHM's contribute a large amount of revenue to the regional towns in which they are situated. WHM's spend money on accommodation, food, activities, tours and are ambassadors for promoting Australia to friends and family overseas, due to their comprehensive use of social media to record their experiences of living and working in Australia. Many have friends and family visit while they are here in Australia. Our region, the Whitsundays, is a great supporter of WHM's who also work in tourism and hospitality roles in Airlie Beach and the Whitsunday Islands.

- Any other related matters.

The current issues we are facing with the WHM cohort having high levels of anxiety about their job prospects and visa uncertainty have stemmed from the uncoordinated

approach to their access to work, due to the visa predominately being for holiday purposes. The addition of the 88 days (or 180 days for 3<sup>rd</sup> year) has certainly assisted the horticulture industry in North Qld to meet unskilled labour demands, however, there is not enough coordination in this space other than the Harvest Trail Service, to ensure that visa holders can meet these requirements without a fair amount of stress and effort. We have recently obtained the services of a Harvest Trail Office in Bowen and Ayr, which we aim to work with closely to address some of these issues with connecting WHM's and Australian workers to horticulture vacancies. WHM's require a much higher level of support to find work and remain lawful in taking up casual work opportunities. There is much confusion amongst the WHM's about the application of their farm days and how this relates to piece rates, there is an opportunity to simplify this calculation to assist employers and workers meet the requirements. COVID 19 has further highlighted the vulnerability of this particular cohort of temporary visa holders. Allowing WHM's to access their superannuation was seen as a positive measure to relieve financial stress, post-covid adoption of this measure would be supported by growers as workers would be able to access their superannuation to spend in Australia to support their holidays rather than only accessing this money once overseas.

Yours faithfully



Carl Walker – President

Bowen Gumlu Growers Association

