

Gracekate Farms

*Family owned & operated growers of QLD produce.
Approved Employer for the Seasonal Worker Program*

Submission for the enquiry into the Seasonal Worker Program

- **The role of the seasonal worker in the horticultural industry.**

For our farm, the seasonal workers employed to date have been a valuable asset to our farming business. We joined this program as we were continually frustrated with the inability to access reliable, local, legal workers who would continuously show up when needed and do a fair days work. We are in a rural area on the Darling Downs Qld. This program offered us a self-managed solution to the labour shortage we were experiencing and gave us confidence to expand our vegetable production. It is a great workforce solution (especially) for seasonal produce growers who rely on casual labour to get the job done within a short time period. For vegetable producers like ourselves a 1-2week delay is an eternity and can mean the difference between a successful crop or a dismal overgrown failure which is just plowed back into the ground. Farmers are price-takers not price-makers. The seasonal worker program provides farmers like ourselves with access to workers who are here to work, show up when required and then work continuously to the best of their ability. Our workers have proved themselves to be honest, accountable and show initiative working side by side with us in the field and the packing shed.

- **Expanding the Seasonal Worker Programme to other countries and sectors;**

The Australian Horticultural Industry is benefitting from this program and with highlighted recent issues with “other” visa holders it is a ready solution that can easily be expanded into other avenues of employment. My only concern is that it is working so well for us (the horticultural workplaces) that we would not wish for our farm to be competing for a limited number of 416 seasonal workers with other industries. (As opposed to labour hire companies who would be unemotional about who would receive the workers as long as they could get their books filled).

Gracekate Farms: submission into the enquiry of the Seasonal Worker Program cont:

- **The impact on the Australian labour force of the current Seasonal Worker Program**

It is not our experience that the Seasonal Worker Program is affecting the Australian labour market. In our rural area, the current workplace situation on the vegetable farm is that most of the workers are already backpackers or other visa holders, either employed directly or through a labour hire company. The workload is casual, seasonal and irregular with work needing to be done in all weather conditions. Just because it is raining doesn't mean we can afford a day off. This situation may differ for those larger businesses who have packhouses etc that operate 12 months of the year and perhaps could offer a permanent position to a local Australian.

- **The role of the Seasonal Worker Program in Supporting Development Assistance in the Pacific.**

Making a difference to their communities. - Our farm recruits workers from Malaita Province in the Solomon Islands. They live in a rural jungle village surrounded by their extended families. With minimal work opportunities they would need to move away from their home to work. We know the difference that this program has made to our workers, their families and their futures. They return home with money to build stronger houses for their families, to pay for their children's (and nieces and nephews) education and medicines. As a community they care for their elders. They purchase motors for their fishing boats so they can safely fish further out to sea. They buy chainsaws to provide their village with an income from selling timber. They do not go home and buy non-essential materialistic items, they invest wisely as they know how precious money is. They return home proud of their achievements and a sense of self-worth. They learn work skills, social skills and life skills, returning home to pass these skills onto their community. (Our workers this season were very proud of their First Aid training received during their stay, and proudly packed these certificates into their bags heading home).

Gracekate Farms: submission into the enquiry of the Seasonal Worker Program cont:

- **The visa regime for seasonal workers, including compliance and related issues.**

Some flexibility needs to be implemented to make this visa more attractive and user friendly to the approved employers such as:

The visa validity period should commence when the worker arrives at the first international point of entry.

Approved employers state start dates on their worker's letter of offer which is sent to immigration as a part of the visa application. Immigration then approves the visa -effectively immediately (can be several weeks prior to the start date). For us (approved employer / grower) this is frustrating as our workers live in a jungle village in the Solomon islands and we are regularly unable to contact them to tell them to pack their bags. They live off solar power and do not have reliable access to mobile phones, internet or fax machines. They travel at least 5hours one way to complete their paperwork. The simplest solution is to validate the 416 visa on arrival in Aus. (first point of entry) which is the case for many other visa types. This would be an easy solution for immigration to implement and would give the applicants and the approved employer more clarity from the on-set.

Visa's should be extendable once the worker is in Australia.

We understand that for many labour hire companies this is not an issue as they are able to continuously roll-over working teams 12months of the year. For smaller growers like ourselves who may recruit only 1-3 workers for a set season (our season is 6-8months max due to extreme Winter frosts). Currently the inability to extend even 1 worker when a harvest has been delayed (due to poor growing conditions such as extreme weather events) creates an immediate labour shortage. It is currently expected that we would recruit an extra worker to cover the shortage but this is difficult in the farmer(approved employer) as we cannot foresee what is going to happen towards the end of our season. Market demand, weather etc. To recruit a replacement worker through this program takes approx. 3 months and unreliable local labour can be a costly exercise to a vegetable farmer . *The ability to extend the 416 visa due to certain circumstances such as a delayed harvest would be most beneficial to the farmers as they get to retain the workers who already have the experience and knowledge to complete the harvest.*

Gracekate Farms: submission into the enquiry of the Seasonal Worker Program cont:

Other issues:

Superannuation seems to be a confusing topic. As a working Australian the whole reason for paying into a superannuation fund is to fund the retirement of Australians in their later years. For seasonal workers they can claim their superannuation entitlements after as little as 3 months work. This is a paperwork nightmare for approved employers. Workers have no idea how this process works and need the AE to help them. ??? Perhaps the powers that be in this review committee could come up with a more sensible solution. ?? Perhaps the 416 workers could be paid a higher rate of pay to compensate for no super payments. ?? Perhaps the super equivalent payment could be paid into a trust account or directly to their home governments to be used only for certain projects agreed to with the Aus Government?? I have no idea what options would be politically correct as I am a vegetable farmer who just wants the best for our family business and for our workers to get paid what they are entitled to.

In closing I would like to publicly acknowledge the help and support that the Seasonal Worker Program team in Canberra have given to the industry in guiding us and promoting this program. It has proved extremely beneficial to our small farm business and we would not have had the confidence to become 416 approved employers without their support.

It is a wonderful program for farmers who cannot find workers who are reliable and willing to stay on the job for the whole season. From our Australian Government's position they are extending a helping hand to our poorer Pacific neighbours who are reaping the rewards from workers returning with healthy bank balances. These workers take home the cash to inject into their local economies, skills learnt on the job in Aus are put to use at home to help their communities and the increased sense of achievement from doing a job well done and the promise of a brighter future from their efforts. It is a win-win situation for Australia and our Pacific Island neighbours.

Finally, thank you for inviting us to enter a submission to this enquiry. If we weren't encouraged by this program we would not still be a part of it and trying to help improve it.

Kind Regards,

Vegetable Farmer / Approved Employer