
From: Paul Casey
Sent: Friday, 3 July 2015 7:18 PM
To: Committee, Migration (REPS)
Subject: Submission for New Enquiry into Seasonal Worker Programme

I am a berry farmer, growing raspberries and blueberries in the Yarra Valley. I came into the horticultural industry 16 years ago and presently grow berries under a contract with Driscolls Australia. I am an 'approved employer' under the Seasonal Worker Programme and for the past 3 years I have employed 10 Vanuatu for approximately 4 months each time. I also employ a permanent workforce and two different harvest contractors each year.

Primarily, the Vanuatu are employed to pick and pack berries but they are also used to prune and tie up berry canes as well as erect and dismantle Haygrove tunnels. Once shown how work is to be performed they have proven to be very reliable, honest and conscientious.

I make this submission because I care about the Australian Horticultural Industry. In my time with it I have observed dramatic growth. To illustrate with some basic statistics:-

Fresh blueberry and raspberry production over past 10 years -

Blueberries - year 2005 - 1,500
year 2015 - 7,000 tonnes
Raspberries - year 2005 - 300
year 2015 - 3,000 tonnes.

As yet the export market is just waiting for us to get our act together. The potential overseas is enormous as the quality of the Australian grown product has already achieved international reputation and is keenly sought after in Japan and in near future China, India, Singapore and Korea.

In Australia, we have the expertise, the land, climate, water and capital. The one ingredient missing is a basic workforce. All berries because of their nature, are hand picked. Not many native borne Australians are willing to pick and pack berries, it is regarded as 'unskilled labour'. As a matter of interest, in my first season as a naive farmer, I employed over 900 persons, primarily sent to my farm from the local Commonwealth Employment office, to get my berry harvest off. Most of these people would leave after 2 or 3 days with excuses like 'it is too hot', 'can't make enough money on piece rates', or simply 'work is too hard'. In subsequent years, I have employed contractors who used people who wanted to work and I have survived and grown my farm production. However, these contractors are drawing on a diminishing resource.

Without question, in my mind, Australia will need a growing number of Pacific Islanders to help us expand the very labour intensive industry - horticulture. It is blindingly obvious that it should happen. The Pacific Islanders are largely under employed, are under resourced and can only gain knowledge and experience working in Australian horticulture. This opportunity represents a much more effective way for our country to provide support and assistance to our neighbours. As my father would say - 'lets kill two birds with the one stone'.

To facilitate the programme and allow for the needed increase in the employment of Pacific Islanders in Australian horticulture, I would make a number of recommendations.

(1) reduce the 'red tape'. Once an employer has been approved under the programme and completed successfully all the pre-requisites to engage workers, then why make it necessary for same employer to repeat the exercise every year. There is a lot of time and effort as well as money used to-

- advertise the positions vacant in local media
- producing photographic evidence of the standard of accommodation to be provided for the employees
- inviting representatives of the Australian Workers Union and Fair Work Australia to meet and 'educate' the prospective employees.

(2) provide government assistance with pastoral care so that human elements in taking care of seasonal workers are more fully encompassed.

(3) reduce the burden on the 'approved employer' who must assist in :-

- visa and travel arrangements and costs
- transport to and from the airport
- cash advances for employees on arrival
- travel to and from local supermarket and church on regular basis

- locating suitable medical centre and chemist facility
- ensuring proper health insurance is taken out
- providing access to internet and international phone connection
- providing a 24 hour 7 day per week contact.

Australian farmers like myself, cannot afford to run an administration office. We cannot compete with any of our overseas competitors because we must pay wages as per the relevant Australian award and as I have indicated previously, horticulture is a very labour intensive industry.