

Select Committee on Temporary Migration
Answers to questions on notice
Agriculture, Water and the Environment Portfolio

Committee: Select Committee on Temporary Migration
Inquiry: Temporary Migration
Question No: 1
Hearing Date: 17 September 2020
Division/Agency: Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Topic: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on temporary migration and changes to temporary visas
Question Date: 28 September 2020
Question Type: Written

The Select Committee on Temporary Migration asked:

1. What assistance has the department offered to Australia's agriculture and horticulture industries affected by the changes to temporary visas during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What evidence has the department collected, or research has it undertaken, into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on temporary migration and Australia's agricultural and horticultural sector?
3. How does temporary migration impact the Australian agricultural and horticultural workforce?

Answer:

1. *What assistance has the department offered to Australia's agriculture and horticulture industries affected by the changes to temporary visas during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

The department has provided regular information to industry about changes to temporary visas throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

This has been done through the Senior Industry Engagement Officer and other regular meetings.

The department has also worked closely with the departments responsible for programs that support agricultural industries access workers.

During August and September 2020, the department coordinated implementation of the workforce trial under the Seasonal Worker Programme which saw 162 workers arrive into Darwin from Vanuatu to assist with the Northern Territory mango harvest. Those workers underwent quarantine at the Howard Springs quarantine facility and are now working on mango farms.

The department has also been closely involved in a range of other measures to help industry access sufficient workers, including:

- Visa changes to allow temporary visa holders already in Australia to continue working in agriculture, and to allow agricultural workers to stay with one employer for a longer period than would normally be allowed (announced 4 April 2020).
- Recommencement of targeted recruitment under the Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme (announced 21 August 2020).
- \$17.4 million in relocation and accommodation assistance (including *More Relocation Support for Agricultural Workers* to temporarily relocate to harvest and regional areas to take up agricultural work and *Expanding Relocation Assistance to Take Up a Job* for

ongoing working in any industry, including agriculture) (part of the 2020-21 Budget, announced 6 October 2020).

- \$16.3 million to incentivise young Australians to take up farm work by temporarily changing Youth Allowance (student) and ABSTUDY independence eligibility criteria (part of the 2020-21 Budget, announced 6 October 2020).

The department has also worked closely with state and territory governments to help resolve workforce issues, including through the development of the Agriculture Workers' Code which provides a nationally-consistent approach to movement across domestic borders for those in occupations critical to the continuity of agriculture.

2. What evidence has the department collected, or research has it undertaken, into the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on temporary migration and Australia's agricultural and horticultural sector?

The department has worked closely with industry throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to assess the impact on the agricultural workforce and the sector more broadly. The department has also engaged regularly with states and territories on workforce needs and options for addressing workforce shortages. This information has been supplemented by data and advice from ABARES, such as the 2018-2019 labour survey data, *Labour Use in Australian Agriculture*, released on 17 September 2020.

The horticulture sector recently commissioned a report assessing workforce shortages. That report, produced by EY and released on 30 September 2020, indicates a growing workforce gap between now and March 2021. The ABARES 2018-2019 labour survey data indicates that, assuming the same pattern of labour use in 2020-2021, the number of casual and contract workers on farms would be expected to increase by approximately 40% from August to March. About half of these casual and contract workers are normally from overseas.

3. How does temporary migration impact the Australian agricultural and horticultural workforce?

ABARES *Labour Use in Australian Agriculture* indicates that in 2018-19 approximately 40 to 50% of casual and contract labour used on farms was from overseas.

The report shows that the total number of workers employed on farms ranged from a high of 354,000 in February 2019 to a low of 303,000 in June 2019, reflecting the seasonality of relatively labour-intensive operations. Casual and contract workers represent a significant portion of the seasonal workforce, ranging from 150,000 in February 2019 to a low of 100,000 in June 2019. Assuming the same pattern of labour use in 2020-2021, the number of casual and contract workers on farms would be expected to increase by approximately 40% between August to March.

Based on this survey, ABARES has undertaken some analysis of possible labour shortages which shows that between September and February the use of overseas workers in agriculture increases by around 20,000.

The horticulture sector recently commissioned a report assessing workforce shortages. That report, produced by EY and released on 30 September 2020, also indicates a growing workforce gap between now and March 2021.

Some of the workforce gap will be offset by farmers finding domestic workers, especially given initiatives by the Commonwealth and State governments. The full impact of these measures is still to be felt.

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Committee: Select Committee on Temporary Migration
Inquiry: Temporary Migration
Question No: 2
Hearing Date: 17 September 2020
Division/Agency: Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Topic: ABARES website
Question Date: 28 September 2020
Question Type: Written

The Select Committee on Temporary Migration asked:

4. On the ABARES website¹, it states there is limited granular data available on labour use in Australian agriculture and that ABARES has developed a series of farm labour surveys 'to provide a profile of the amount and type of labour used on farms, recruitment experiences and difficulties and future challenges'². Are you able to provide an update to the committee on the results of these surveys?
 - a. Do any of these surveys focus on the type of labour used on farms, specifically in relation to temporary migration?
5. Your website³ states that 'ABARES is currently conducting a survey on labour use in the horticulture industry for 2018-2019' and that 'this work seeks to better inform government policies that support farm businesses to meet demand for appropriate workers'. Are you able to provide an update to the committee on the results of this survey?
 - a. Will the results of this survey be used to inform government policies relating to temporary migration?
6. Your website⁴ notes that ABARES produces Insights papers that are 'short highly accessible publications providing 'snapshots' or 'stocktakes' of agricultural, forestry and fisheries industries, or exploring current issues of interest'. Will ABARES be producing an Insights paper on temporary migration in the Australian agriculture or horticulture sector and the impact of COVID-19 on these industries?

¹ Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, 31 August 2020, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares> (accessed 4 September 2020)

² Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment - Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, Labour, 15 April 2020, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour#recent-reports> (accessed 4 September 2020)

³ Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment - Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, Labour, 15 April 2020, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour#recent-reports> (accessed 4 September 2020)

⁴ Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, 31 August 2020, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/publications/insights> (accessed 4 September 2020)

Answer:

- Q4. Results from ABARES farm labour survey were published on the ABARES website on 17 September 2020, available at www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour.
- Q4a. The ABARES farm labour survey collected data on labour use on Australian farms by worker type (including overseas casual and contract workers) and worker background (including working holiday makers and other visa holders) by region and industry.
- Q5. The results from ABARES farm labour survey were published on the ABARES website on 17 September 2020, available at www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour.
- Q5a. The results from ABARES farm labour survey have been publicly released and may be considered in informing government policies.
- Q6. The information recently published (17 September 2020) on the farm labour survey has many of the characteristics of an Insights paper with published data and related explanations. ABARES will continue to report on the outlook for agricultural industries, including horticulture, in the quarterly *Agricultural Commodities* publication, next due for release on 8 December 2020.