



Joint Standing Committee on Migration

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A submission from Rural Australians for Refugees Queanbeyan.
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The Potential Benefits of Refugee Jobs in Agriculture

Submission in brief

1. Agriculture forms the basis of the Australian economy
2. Losses to soil degradation and lost production are now \$2.5 billion per year and growing
3. The Regional Australia Institute's research indicates that more than 3000 people leave the rural sector for the city every year
4. Agricultural costs grow every year while profits fall every year
5. Australia spends around \$11 billion per annum on waste management
6. Approximately 70% of Australia's 60 million tonne waste stream is organic material
7. Research has shown that removing organic waste through source separation improves the value (marketability) of plastics and other recyclables
8. Research has demonstrated that quality source-separated organic waste can be returned to agriculture as high quality, biologically active compost
9. The Armidale NSW Council has shown that the source-separation of organic waste and recyclables will result in high-quality saleable products

10. Green Connect, Wollongong and Parklands, Wodonga have demonstrated that composted organic waste can be used to produce food in vegetable gardens operated by refugees, unemployed and disabled people.
11. The use of refugees to recycle organic materials would create employment, reduce agricultural costs, reduce the losses of people to the cities. Create new employment opportunities in regional centres

Agricultural labour losses and costs

Agriculture forms the basis of all human economy and while it is said that agriculture in Australia is responsible for only 12 to 15% of GDP, it is as crucial to our survival as the air we breathe. Oxygen forms only 20% of the air we take in but how long would we last without it?

In 1999 the CSIRO reported that we were losing \$750 million worth of soil every year in the Murray Darling Basin to soil degradation. As yet there has been no indication in any of the scientific literature that this situation has improved. In fact, current indications are that degradation now costs \$2.5 billion per year in lost production.

The Regional Australia Institute has completed research in recent years which indicates that there is an on-going drain of skills and talent from the 'bush' into the cities which is in excess of 3000 people every year. Given the other pressures that agriculture is under, it can ill afford to lose population in addition to productive land.

In the larger economic picture, agriculture constantly faces a situation where input costs constantly increase while sales prices are expected to drop with efficiency. It is one of very few industries in the world which are expected to 'buy retail and sell wholesale'. We believe that many of the pressures associated with cost structures and falling community numbers can be addressed by incoming migrants and specifically, refugees.

Many of the circumstances in the world which have created the current level of 62 million refugees are due to pressures of food production, specifically those associated with water and other input cost structures. There is more than enough food in the world to feed our global population – in fact there is an excess of approximately 40% waste. It is wars, politics and conflict which cause poverty and dislocation – not a lack of food.

Agriculture faces a compounding circumstance in Australia where the costs of production are directly impacting the long-term profitability of the farm.

On top of the labour drain from the bush, farming is constantly facing increasing costs in inputs such as fertiliser and water, as well as the negative impacts of climate change. We would propose that it is possible to create a model which would not only address the labour drainage issue but will also reduce input costs to agriculture, utilising the same budget allocations which local government uses for recycling.

Organic waste – returning to agriculture

History has shown us that using compost on soils raises soil organic material and increases the ability to continue to grow food on that land.

Increased soil organic material helps retain moisture, expands biological soil diversity, increases nutrient transfer, sequesters soil carbon to help reduce the effects of Climate Change, reduces farmers input costs and increases profits - all of which provides us with more reliable sources of food. Protecting our soils is a very urgent priority for all of us. We can help do this with compost.

More than half of the waste we produce is organic material. If buried in landfill it creates methane - when incinerated it creates dioxin, furan and toxic ash. When composted this same material can help us ensure the long-term viability of our food production systems.

In Australia food organics and garden organics are increasingly collected together. In the more successful of these programs such as City to Soil, used in Armidale NSW, the simple message given to householders is that 'we need this material clean because it is going back to soil to grow food'. This simple education campaign has been enormously effective. Given the right tools, information and motivation, householders are readily prepared to ensure that their organic waste contains no contaminants such as metals, glass or plastic and can be used to ultimately grow food.

Source Separation

Recent issues associated with materials being rejected by China clearly show that the key to marketing of any recycled product, organic or inorganic is ensuring high quality through cleanliness and a lack of cross-contamination. This is achieved through source-separation.

Armidale, NSW still collects its inorganic recyclables in such a way as to ensure quality is maintained and sales are assured. This has also been demonstrated in Wales, UK where 14 of the 22 local government authorities which operate source-separation systems have no difficulty in selling products either locally or overseas. [<https://gov.wales/newsroom/environmentandcountryside/2016/160322-recycling-blueprint/?lang=en>]

The quality of inorganic materials is further assured by the removal of food organics and garden organics (FOGO). In Wales, all food waste collected separately goes into anaerobic digestors to generate electricity. The resulting digestate is used in agriculture. In Armidale NSW, the high quality FOGO is composted and sold back to the community, which reduces landfill, supports local food production and assists community health.

Green Connect in Wollongong and Parklands in Wodonga have demonstrated that these high-quality composted products can be used in local food production by refugees, the unemployed and disabled residents under the NDIS program. These programs, administered by Social Enterprise, while requiring some initial financial

support can ultimately be funded through council waste budgets and food sales through community supported agriculture models.

This same model could be used extensively throughout Australia to divert materials from landfill, increase soil quality, create employment opportunities for migrants and displaced persons and support local agricultural and food production systems.

Recommendations:

- a) Provide funds for the Regional Australia Institute and their selected partners to conduct a comprehensive national cost benefit analysis of this simple issue, including implications for the environment and for on the ground Council activities*
- b) Conduct a series of on ground pilots to prove local social and economic benefits*