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Media
Release

Growers struggle to find local workers to pick their crops

A report published today by Swinburne University shows that fruit and vegetable growers have trouble finding seasonal workers to pick their crops and sometimes resort to illegal immigrants to get the job done.

Peter Mares, a senior research fellow at Swinburne's Institute for Social Research, surveyed horticultural producers in the rich irrigated horticultural region stretching along the Murray River between Swan Hill and Mildura in northwest Victoria.

Growers were asked about their current use of seasonal workers and their anticipated needs for the future. Of the 176 growers who responded, more than half rated the availability of seasonal workers in their area as 'inadequate' or 'extremely inadequate'. One in ten growers indicated that a shortage of labour was currently preventing expansion of their enterprise and more than a quarter anticipated that labour shortages would restrict future expansion.

Mares says that until now evidence of a seasonal labour shortage was largely anecdotal. 'We'd hear growers complaining about fruit left to rot on trees because they couldn't find enough workers to do the picking but as far as we know, this is the first attempt to document or quantify the extent of the problem in a particular area'.

A surprising outcome of the survey was that more than one in four growers admitted to sometimes employing illegal immigrants. 'This was a controversial question and one or two people took offence at even being asked' says Mares. 'However the results confirm what we suspected – that the shortage of seasonal labour creates a situation in which illegal workers end up doing the job'.

The survey also canvassed growers' attitudes towards the idea of an offshore scheme to enable foreign workers to enter Australia on a temporary visa to undertake seasonal jobs in horticulture. A large majority of growers (70%) expressed interest in employing workers under such a scheme in at least some years, with one in five growers saying that they could use overseas workers every year.

However Mares says growers expressed some reluctance to shoulder the additional costs that such a scheme might entail, with a significant proportion (39%) saying that all costs should be deducted from the overseas workers' wages.

'Overall the survey results show that there is an identifiable shortage of workers to the demand for labour in peak season' says Mares. 'Most growers are interested in employing overseas workers on a temporary basis and our findings suggest that a logical next step would be a small-scale pilot project to further test the feasibility of such a scheme.'

The survey was carried out as part of the project *Pacific Labour and Australian Horticulture*, which is investigating the idea of a seasonal labour program for Pacific Islanders to work in Australian agriculture. The project is funded by an industry linkage grant from the Australian Research Council and brings Swinburne University together with three industry partners: the Sunraysia Mallee Economic Development Board (Mildura), the Economic Development Unit of Swan Hill Rural City Council and the international development agency Oxfam/Community Aid Abroad.

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