



SELECT HARVESTS

SUBMISSION TO

SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

INQUIRY ON PACIFIC REGION SEASONAL CONTRACT LABOUR

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About Select Harvests Limited

Select Harvests Limited, Australia's largest almond grower, manages in excess 60% of Australia's almond orchards, and is firmly placed in the top 5 almond growers globally. It is also Australia's leading manufacturer, processor and marketer of a range of nuts; fruit based, and associated products to the Australian retail and industrial markets, and exports almonds to several countries in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Almond Operations

- Owns/leases and manages almond orchards in the Robinvale area of north-west Victoria.
- Manages on a fee for service basis, almond orchards on behalf of a number of external investors. These services include establishment, farm management, harvesting, processing, and marketing.
- Presently there is 25,000 acres under management with 9,940 acres being harvested in 2006. Further acres will be established in 2007, 08 and 09.
- Currently handles approximately 40% of Australia's 15,000 tonne almond crop from owned and managed orchards.
- Exports approximately 40% of its almond production to a range of countries including India, Japan, China, Indonesia, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, Russia, France, Holland, and Belgium.

Select Harvests Limited employs approximately 140 permanent and permanent part-time employees in the Robinvale area of north-west Victoria. The employment of seasonal workers throughout the year currently varies between 80 to 250 people.

With the forecast of increased acreages the requirement of skilled permanent and contract personnel is becoming an increasing HR issue. Select Harvests Limited is investing considerably in attempting to achieve a workforce which will deliver benefits to employees, the community and investor alike. The associated requirement of seasonal workers to meet the needs of the new developments over the next few years is of concern.

Response to Terms of Reference

I. Labour shortages in rural and regional Australia - specific to NW Victoria and Select Harvests Limited

During periods of peak labour (planting, harvesting and pruning) an even labour supply is presently assured by our locally based contract labour provider (Tree Minders Pty Ltd).

Tree Minders owners are of Tongan origin and predominately use Pacific Islanders to meet the numbers required for the seasonal contracts offered by Select Harvests Limited.

Over the past five years Select Harvests Limited has developed an alliance with Tree Minders Pty Ltd which delivers skilled personnel for the pruning, harvesting and planting disciplines of the almond process. Due to the seasonality of the work required, it is possible for Tree Minders Pty Ltd to provide near all year round employment for a number of its labour force. Tree Minders Pty Ltd has developed their business to the extent it needs to increase its skilled seasonal workforce and has been actively working with both the Australian and Tongan Governments to achieve a skilled labour force to supply Select Harvests Limited's increased needs in the future.

A number of avenues have been reviewed:

- Discussions with DIMIA regarding the new 2 year Trade Skills Training Visa application. Tree Minders, with the assistance of Select Harvests Limited, has made application for an initial 20 persons under this visa.
- Investigation of introducing training modules in Tonga for prospective seasonal employees. The training will assist in supplying skilled Short Term Visa applicants being able to be employed in Australia on a rotating basis.
- Sourcing skilled labour from interstate.

The seasonal process of almond "hulling and cracking" is generally sourced through back packers and the "grey army" that are semi retired people who choose a lifestyle of seasonal work and travel. The time and effort to train and induct seasonal employees into the business is considerable so as to maintain quality assurance and HACCP practices. The Company actively pursues "return" seasonal workers for this process. The increased numbers that will be required to "hull and crack" the almond field product in the future will almost triple the already 40 personnel required for this season. The difficulty experienced in 2006 in achieving this full compliment of seasonal workers for the facility was high.

II. The availability and mobility of domestic contract labour, and the likely effects of such a scheme on the current seasonal workforce

Select Harvests Limited over a number of years has developed working relationships with labour hire contractors to enable seasonal tasks to be conducted to meet the horticultural needs of the business.

The availability of mobile domestic contract labour has reduced dramatically over the past ten years. This has increased the issues with respect to having an even labour force and achieving Quality Assurance and HACCP parameters.

Select Harvests Limited works with its alliance partner to meet the needs of the business and enables the partner to offer year round skilled employment for “job seekers”. It has become increasingly difficult to attract people to the area who are willing to work seasonally. Having a year long seasonal working regime does not guarantee the numbers required to complete the increased horticultural tasks.

It is with this in mind that Select Harvest Limited and Tree Minders have investigated the short term visa route which would involve training in the homeland of the labour source and using the skilled labour in the Robinvale region to conduct the skilled tasks for periods of three to six months. After completion of the contract the “worker” is returned to his/her homeland readying for more skilled seasonal work in the future.

III. Social and Economic effects of the scheme on local communities

It would be fairer to say that by offering year long and seasonal labour to potential employees, our partner would be able to contribute to the expansion of the social infrastructure of the region and advance the economic development of the Pacific region.

The last ten years has seen the Robinvale area become one of the most diverse multicultural communities in Australia. A combination of Caucasian, Asian, Middle Eastern, Pacific Island and Indigenous Australians has increased the need of an improved social infrastructure to meet the needs of increased community numbers and the diverse cultures it brings to the region.

The proposal to utilise Pacific Region Seasonal Contract labour (specifically Tongan) would fit the required expansion of the area’s infrastructure and accommodate the religious needs of the seasonal workers. Tree Minders Pty Ltd is willing to invest in infrastructure with the assistance from Select Harvests Limited, and Local, State and Federal Governments to meet the requirements for short or long term visa applicants.

IV. Likely technical, legal and administrative considerations for such a scheme

If the “scheme” was agreed, we would be in a position to commence a pilot program as Tree Minders Pty Ltd have had extensive discussions with the Tongan Government covering the basic requirements for short term visa or two (2) year Trade Skills Training Visa. The likely candidates would be:

- Would be tested under the International English Language Testing System
- Have an agreed level of education achieved through Tongan education systems
- Pass all health checks
- Demonstrated good work and social ethic
- Involved in some homeland-based formal training through agreed training modules for the horticultural tasks

The administrative considerations for short term visa workers could be covered under the following:

- Labour contractor would hold all passports until “workers” returns to homeland
- Labour contractor act as sponsor and is responsible for “workers” to return to their homeland after completion of seasonal work
- Labour contractor pay “workers” under Australian pay and conditions
- Board and Lodgings for the “worker” would be taken from the weekly wage
- A living allowance taken from the weekly wage would be supplied to the “worker” on a week to week basis
- Majority of wages earned would be available after returning to homeland

V. The effects of the scheme on the economies of Pacific Nations

We believe our labour contractor, Tree Minders Pty Ltd would best to answer this question based on their extensive knowledge of Tonga and potential positive effects on the Pacific Island Nation.

In closing, I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with the committee and discuss the above issues and the submission and answer any questions the committee may have.

Yours Sincerley

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