



23 SEP, 2020

Illegal worker lifeline

Weekly Times, Melbourne

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Canberra considers amnesty to offset labour shortage

Illegal worker lifeline

EXCLUSIVE

By **NATALIE KOTSIOS**
AND **ALEXANDRA LASKIE**

AN AMNESTY for illegal farm workers is quietly being explored by federal Agriculture Minister David Littleproud.

The move, which could allow undocumented workers to come forward without fear of being deported, comes amid growing pressure on governments to tackle a looming labour shortage across Australian agriculture.

With industry warning there will not be enough legal workers to get them through the coming harvest, state agriculture ministers led by Victoria called on the Commonwealth to look at options for an amnesty almost two months ago.

Estimates put the number of illegal workers in Australia between 60,000 and 100,000, with thousands believed to be on fruit and vegetable farms.

An amnesty was first raised by the Victorian Farmers Federation three years ago, as a way to stamp out worker exploitation and clean up the system. It was backed by the Australian Workers Union and National

Union of Workers (now United Workers Union) but received no interest from government until now.

In a letter from Victorian Agriculture Minister Jaclyn Symes to Mr

Littleproud, seen by *The Weekly Times*, Ms Symes requests an update on the status of an amnesty.

“At our meeting of 29 July you committed to looking at options for an amnesty for undocumented workers. An amnesty would remove barriers to engaging with health services, including COVID-19 testing and treatment, reducing overall risk across the agricultural workforce. It may also assist to meet current labour shortage concerns,” Ms Symes wrote.

Mr Littleproud did not respond to questions from *The Weekly Times* about a possible amnesty, only stating: “Any decision to allow an amnesty on illegal workers must be done with a national security lens in mind with appropriate agencies’ input.”

Ms Symes did not answer questions about the letter or her stance on an illegal worker amnesty, but it is believed the idea was raised again by farmers in Victoria’s North East as an incentive to encourage workers to

stay in their roles and country towns where they’re living.

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Illegal worker lifeline to help fix looming harvest shortage

headcount when we're not taking these workers into consideration."

Data is scarce, but a VFF survey in 2019 found 71 per cent of Sunraysia growers suspected they had undocumented workers on their farms.

Illegal workers were pushed further into the shadows when the Victorian Government introduced a labour hire licensing scheme last year that penalises employers for using unlicensed labour hire firms that were fuelling the trade in illegal workers.

International travel bans due to the coronavirus pandemic mean the number of backpackers and Pacific Island seasonal workers — usually relied upon for harvest work —

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A precedent was set for such a move in May, when Italy announced an amnesty for thousands of undocumented migrant workers ahead of its peak harvest period in May.

VFF vice-president Emma Germano was pleased the Government was exploring the option, and said there needed to be a legitimate way forward for workers who had become entrenched in the system.

"It might not necessarily alleviate the future shortage but it will help, and would help farmers access all the other programs available," she said.

"It's the elephant in the room that prevents us from getting a true picture of what's going on ... we can't take a true

have plummeted; industry estimates more than 64,000 roles will need to be filled by summer, but backpackers are leaving at a rate of 1000 a week.

An inquiry into the working holiday maker program issued an interim report last week recommending school leavers and students could be lured to help fill the gaps in exchange for discounted HECS fees.

It also called for workers to stay on Jobseeker payments while undertaking low-paid agricultural work, and the establishment of a hotline for working holiday makers where they could access all the advice they need about their working rights.

AusVeg chief executive James Whiteside said it was these sorts of measures his industry group supported in place of a worker amnesty, which he believed sent the wrong message to farmers who have done the right thing by employing legal workers.

"AusVeg does not believe an amnesty is a solution to the horticulture industry's labour challenges. The fundamental issue which is facing our industry is labour supply. We need more workers," Mr Whiteside said.

The United Workers Union recommitted its support for a visa amnesty for farm workers, with UWU farms director Jannette Armstrong describing it as a crucial part in a suite of measures required to address horticulture's labour crisis.

"Everyone residing in Australia should have work rights, especially those we have long depended on to do essential jobs such as growing, picking, and packing our fresh fruit and vegetables," Ms Armstrong said.