

NEWS

Coalition divided amid concerns agriculture visa could undermine Pacific Islands worker scheme

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The horticulture industry has had an estimated shortfall of 26,000 farm workers since Australia closed its borders (*ABC News: Jess Davis*)

There is growing unease within the Coalition over the federal government's proposed new agriculture visa, as experts warn it could undermine Australia's flagship labour schemes for Pacific Island workers.

Senior officials in the Pacific have also told the ABC they're concerned their workers could be sidelined if there is an influx of labourers from other countries.

Agriculture Minister David Littleproud yesterday declared that he had won a commitment from the Prime Minister to introduce an agriculture visa that would allow South-East Asian workers to undertake temporary seasonal work in Australia.

Key points:

- The details of the new scheme are still unclear
- Unions have warned there would be an "explosion" of exploitation on farms
- Experts say it will compete with and undermine the existing schemes

The Nationals have long demanded a new visa to help deal with widespread rural labour shortages, and Mr Littleproud said the government would get the new scheme up and running by the end of the year.

The minister initially suggested the new visa would be much less tightly regulated than the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) or the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), although his press release sent out later in the day said the visa would "mirror" existing Pacific labour programs.



Agriculture Minister David Littleproud says the agriculture visa will build worker capacity.

The two schemes allow thousands of Pacific Islanders to enter Australia for temporary work. While there have been several instances of exploitation, the SWP and PLS provide Pacific Island workers with a vital source of income and are a central pillar of the Morrison Government's 'Pacific step-up' initiative.

Unions have warned there would be an "explosion" of exploitation on Australian farms under the new agriculture visa, while economists say farmers will inevitably abandon Pacific labour programs if they can opt for a new visa with fewer protections for workers.

'Worker welfare is absolutely paramount'

The issue has also sparked internal angst in the Coalition.

Some Liberal MPs have accused the Nationals of trying to force the government's hand over the issue, and are vowing to make sure the new visa has similar safeguards to the SWP.

Yesterday, Minister for the Pacific Zed Seselja told the Senate that "worker welfare is absolutely paramount" and declared that "any new arrangements" would have to "build on and complement" the "gold standard" set by Pacific labour schemes.

Several economists and labour experts have also lashed the proposal. Stephen Howes from the Australian National University told the ABC that the new agriculture visa made no sense.

"It will compete with the Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme, and it will undermine those two schemes," he said.

"Obviously, it's easier to recruit from a large economy like Indonesia or Vietnam than from Vanuatu or Tonga. So once you open the scheme to those larger economies, employers are going to flock there rather than to the Pacific."



The Pacific Labour Scheme is a major source of employment for young people in the Solomon Islands. (Flickr: uusc4all)

Concerns from the Pacific Islands

Some senior officials in the Pacific Island region have also criticised the proposal.

The top public servant in Solomon Islands Foreign Ministry, Collin Beck, told the ABC that the visa was "worrying" for his country because it would share the "same space" as labour schemes that provided Solomon Islands workers with an income.

"These less regulated schemes ... we fear that farmers and employers will find it much more attractive than the Seasonal Worker Programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme," he said.

"These two programs, especially during this COVID period, is something we value.

"We have 18,000 youths every year seeking jobs and only a few thousand are actually finding jobs, so the SWP and the PLS are basically two schemes that are part of our recovery process during this COVID period."

Vanuatu Opposition MP and former agriculture minister Matai Seremaiah also sounded a note of concern, saying Pacific Island nations were in "dire need" of remittances from labour schemes during the COVID19 pandemic.

"I think it's going to affect us deeply, especially ... in a time where we're in crisis, because of the pandemic," he told the ABC's Pacific Beat program.

"I think the [Australian] government needs to really look into it and see where the problem arises that gave to the idea of Australia moving to the east instead of the Pacific."

Farmer lobby groups have been pressing for an agriculture visa for years and have welcomed Mr Littleproud's announcement — [although they remain sceptical about whether it will be delivered.](#)

Kerry McCarthy – who has employed seasonal workers from Solomon Islands at her vegetable farm in Queensland's Darling Downs for almost a decade – said she would welcome any new scheme that brought more workers to rural Australia.

But she's also worried about what a new agriculture visa could mean for the Pacific.

"I am concerned about detrimental effect that a huge influx of new workers might have on the Seasonal Workers Programme," she said.

"Certainly with new workers coming in from ASEAN area – we'd need to see similar mechanisms in place for those workers as well."

So far only a handful of South-East Asian nations have responded to the federal government's announcement.

Indonesia's ambassador to Australia told the ABC yesterday that his country welcomed the planned visa and said Indonesia looked forward to getting more details from the Australian Government.