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## Australian Border Force raids Bundaberg property over missing seasonal workers

ABC Rural / By Megan Hughes

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Geoffrey and Jane Smith have been providing pastoral care to seasonal workers in Bundaberg for almost a decade. (ABC Rural: Megan Hughes)

Australian Border Force (ABF) officers have raided a Bundaberg property as part of an investigation into missing seasonal workers.

The officers, who had been issued a warrant to search the home of pastoral carers Jane and Geoffrey Smith, seized data from mobile phones and computers during the raid.

"I was laying pavers and next thing you know there's two officers standing about a metre-and-a-half away from me," Mr Smith said.

"I looked up and got such a hell of a fright."

### Key points:

- Earlier this year, 51 workers in Bundaberg absconded from the seasonal worker program
- ABF officers recently searched a property in relation to its investigation
- The couple, who provide pastoral support to seasonal workers, have not been charged

### Missing workers

Earlier this year, 51 workers in Bundaberg absconded from the federal government's seasonal worker program.

They left the program after an employment dispute to search for better pay and work conditions.

As of March, 15 workers had been reconnected to the program but the visa status of more than 30 others remained unknown.

Mr Smith said one of the officers explained the allegations to him during the raid last month.

"He said we want to get information from you that you've been aiding and abetting workers. You've been getting them work [and] you've been receiving money," Mr Smith said.

But he denied the allegations.

"I said, 'I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know'," Mr Smith said.

His wife Jane said the raid was a confronting experience.

"Virtually everywhere we moved they followed us," she said.

"Everything just sort of come down on me and just hit me what was going on.

"I just broke down and I cried and cried and cried."



Geoffrey and Jane Smith say they are considering taking a step back from their pastoral care work. (ABC Rural: Megan Hughes)

## **Probe could take weeks, maybe years**

Mr and Mrs Smith have not been charged.

Lawyer Stewart Levitt said the investigation could take anywhere from a few weeks to a few years.

"They (ABF) have to demonstrate to a magistrate that they have reasonable suspicion that an offence may have been committed," Mr Levitt said.

"They use that as the foundation for conducting a raid on someone's premises and taking their documents and accessing their confidential information.

"It often leads to charges down the track, sometimes it doesn't — it depends what they find."

Mr Levitt said the Smiths were being investigated for offences under the Migration Act, namely that they "referred or continues to refer unlawful non-citizens for work".

If convicted, the charges carry a maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment.

"What we find appalling about this is people like the Smiths who have been working to provide pastoral care to South Sea Islanders, and provide comfort and assistance to them would be hounded by Border Force in this way," Mr Levitt said.

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The Australian Border Force confirmed officers visited the Bundaberg region the week starting Monday, July 19.

"As the matter relates to an ongoing investigation, it would not be appropriate to comment further," the spokesperson said.

"Anyone who is aware of an individual, business or employer who may be facilitating visa fraud or illegal work is urged to contact border watch."

### **'I could keep going'**

Mr and Mrs Smith said they were trying to figure out where to go from here.

They are considering taking a step back from their pastoral care work.

"I've got to think of my wife too — I could keep going," Mr Smith said.

"They think they can hurt me, they think they can do this, but my God tells me if I'm doing the right thing and doing things that a normal caring person would do — you do it."