



Robinvale & District Table Grape Growers Association
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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

01 March 2023

To the Committee Secretary, Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Re: Submission to the Inquiry on Migration, Pathway to Nation Building

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the 'Inquiry on Migration, Pathway to Nation Building' (the **Inquiry**).

This submission is made on behalf of members of the Robinvale and District Table Grape Growers Association (**RDTGGA**) and addresses points 1, 2, 3 and 5 of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

The growing of grapes in the Robinvale district began after WW2 with the establishment of a Soldier Settlement Scheme for returned servicemen. Initially, grapes were grown for dried fruit on 25 acre blocks with the transition to table grapes beginning in the 1960's. The industry has expanded; large holdings have added to the original blocks and the table grape industry is now a multimillion dollar industry.

The RDTGGA represents horticulturists who produce table grapes for the domestic and export market. Being grower members, they have first-hand knowledge of the extreme difficulties of securing a permanent workforce and know that any discussion on migration policy and associated visas must include the unskilled worker cohort.

Migration has been a pathway to nation building; it is essential to attract and retain both skilled and unskilled migrants equally. Unskilled migrant labour plays a critical role in the agricultural industry in Australia, particularly in our region, which includes Robinvale and its surrounding districts. Post-WW2 migration from Europe, Pacific Islander workers from the 1970's onwards and more recently workers from South East Asia have all contributed to the success of agriculture in our area.

This area has made a significant contribution to providing food not only to Australia but also to the world. In terms of monetary value, the total value of agricultural products produced in

the LGA's of Mildura, Swan Hill, Balranald and Wentworth in 2020/21 was \$2.304 billion; of this \$1.5 billion was fruit and nuts with table grapes contributing \$472 million.¹

The positive impact of immigration can be seen in rural areas, where economic benefits, as well as positive social outcomes, have been observed. Across Robinvale over thirty different languages are spoken.² Members of the town's multicultural communities live in harmony, take on leadership roles in the town and provide a workforce for our agricultural/horticultural industries and associated secondary industries.

Protection and Bridging visas are essential to the agricultural industry as they allow farmers to access a pool of unskilled labour that is critical to their operations. Anti-slavery legislation and labour licensing rules operate to ensure that the rights of migrant labourers are protected.

The demise of the proposed Australian Agricultural Visa has been a significant setback for the industry as it would have allowed for a more streamlined and efficient process for bringing in unskilled migrant labour. The AWU's opposition to the Australian Agriculture Visa did not take in to account the fact that eligible Australian citizens do not/will not relocate to rural Australia to undertake unskilled agricultural work. Government initiatives such as the \$6000 incentive to work in rural Australia and the \$4000 Age Pension income allowance are at best a Band-Aid solution and cannot deliver a reliable and constant workforce.

As food producers, we understand the importance of providing for our families and the satisfaction that comes with it. This sense of worth should be afforded to everyone, especially unskilled agricultural workers striving for a better life for their families. It is crucial to provide equal access and opportunity to these workers by affording relevant visa holders the right to obtain employment. This will also ensure that our industry can continue to thrive and contribute to the nation's economy.

The mental health of unskilled workers in Australia is severely impacted by the constant threat of their visas being cancelled. The psychological pressure of arriving in a foreign country, learning new skills, and adhering to unfamiliar regulations and employment laws is daunting enough. Coupled with the possibility of deportation at any moment, it creates a sense of constant unease and uncertainty. These individuals are left in a perpetual state of anxiety, always looking over their shoulders and living in fear of the worst-case scenario.

The humanitarian side of this issue is illustrated by the following examples. A Pacific Islander lady in the Robinvale area had been subjected to unbearable stress due to her uncertain immigration status. Along with her husband, she was striving to provide a better life for their children and themselves. They were hard-working and actively involved in fundraising for the local school, serving on the school board, and contributing to the community through taxes and local spending. Unfortunately, while on their way to seek legal advice in Melbourne regarding their immigration status, they were involved in a tragic road accident. Her husband did not survive, and he is laid to rest in Robinvale.

It is impossible to comprehend the depth of this family's anguish when they were subsequently informed that her visa status was defunct and she was threatened with deportation. The contributions of both this lady and her husband, along with their children, to the rural community of Robinvale are undeniable. Despite their immense contributions, they

¹ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/aclump/land-use/agriculture-census-dashboards-lga>

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-16/back-roads-is-robinvale-australias-most-multicultural-town/9944608#:~:text=The%20town%20has%20a%20fluctuating%20population%20of%20about%20thann%2030%20languages%20spoken%20in%20the%20community>

are treated as second-rate citizens. The lack of empathy and compassion for migrants, who contribute significantly through their hard work to make Australia a better country, is unacceptable. It should be possible for a visa system to be robust but to also operate fairly and justly and with room for compassion.

Another example of the complexities involved in obtaining visas can be seen through the experience of a Taiwanese man who was happily employed in the table grape industry in Robinvale. He carried out his duties diligently and applied for an extension to his visa. His application was denied. As a result, he has recently had no other option but to relocate to Melbourne to seek an apprenticeship.

This man was understandably distraught because he had thoroughly enjoyed working in agriculture, had acquired skills, been given responsibility and was an asset to his employer. He was well on his way to becoming an experienced, valuable contributor to the industry.

However, as is often the case with visa complications, this man was left with no choice but to try and find an alternative way to obtain permanent residency. It is a sad reality that many people in similar situations are forced into this situation, as they try to navigate the complexities of immigration laws and regulations. These are examples that food producers encounter on a regular basis, and are real life situations. It is likely that these experiences are common to agricultural regions around Australia.

In the end, it is the loss of skilled workers and valued members of the community which means that regional towns suffer. It is important that we continue to work towards creating more streamlined and accessible processes for those seeking to work and contribute to our country.

Ours is an industry that is labour intensive. In Robinvale alone, several thousand workers are required annually to work on table grape properties for nine to ten months of the year. As an industry based in rural Australia we ask that unskilled workers are included in any discussions regarding immigration policy, as both skilled and unskilled workers contribute to Australian society. We must also remember that unskilled workers are only unskilled until trained effectively. This training is provided by hard working employers and labour licensed providers usually on the job; this can only happen if unskilled migrants are given appropriate visas and security knowing that they are safe to work. As food producers working closely with these so called 'unskilled migrant workers' we know that anyone can become skilled in their chosen field with the appropriate guidance. Farmers and food producers, specifically the table grape industry in the Sunraysia area, know all too well that immigration is a contentious issue federally; locally it is our biggest asset in creating sustainable jobs and contributing to the national economy. With this in mind we ask that the following recommendations be considered.

Recommendations:

- Guidelines for any visa scheme regarding permanent migration in rural Australia be specific to rural and regional hubs or local government areas, relevant to the agriculture industry and easy to follow; this is achievable with close consultation with employers, potential employees and licenced labour hire providers.
- More certainty and an increase in the length of time current Bridging and Protection visas are valid, thus creating a platform for secure transition to possible permanent migration.

- Revisit the Australian Agriculture Visa program, with the possibility for permanent migration and to include as many ASEAN countries willing to participate in said visa scheme. Consultation with the Australian Table Grape Association, along with all relevant agricultural industry associations would assist this process.
- Recognise the amount of time that migrant farm workers spend working and living in regional communities, focusing on the skills they have acquired after significant training while in “seasonal” and casual work. With this in mind, find pathways to permanent migration.
- Increase sponsorship opportunities for all skill level jobs in agriculture, so that working migrants can have realistic and achievable pathways to permanent migration.

Thank you for your time and consideration in accepting this submission.

Yours sincerely,

A black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the President of RDTGGA.

President , RDTGGA.