



9 December, 2022

**Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development
Joint Submission
Mareeba Chamber of Commerce
and
FNQ Growers**

Mareeba Chamber of Commerce (the Chamber) and FNQ Growers (FNQG) appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Northern Australian Workforce Development.

The Chamber is the business advocacy body representing the interests of the business community in Mareeba, west of Cairns, in Far North Queensland. Mareeba is one of the fastest growing local government areas in Queensland.

FNQG is the advocacy body for the horticultural industry based in Far North Queensland, extending north from Lakeland, south to Tully and west to Georgetown. The region is the fourth most significant fruit bowl in Queensland, and an agricultural powerhouse in northern Australia.

The regional community of Mareeba and surrounds continues to suffer from labour shortages across a number of industries. The labour shortages being experienced by our community have been well documented, tabled and voiced at all levels of government.

Business

As the key advocacy group for the Mareeba business community, the Chamber has received anecdotal reports of the issues businesses are experiencing in attracting and retaining staff.

These reports include businesses posting multiple job vacancy advertisements with limited to no response.

There appears to be a limited candidate pool available for a range of industries including, but not limited to, hospitality, retail, tourism and service.

This is creating grave issues for businesses, with some being forced to reduce opening hours or restrict services offered. The business community wants real, long-term solutions to this issue which is impacting business growth.

Health

Mareeba is experiencing a shortage of health practitioners including medical practitioners.

The Chamber has received anecdotal reports of GP practices that are unable to take new patients while waiting lists for appointments are reaching ridiculous levels, with some patients being forced to wait more than three weeks to see their private doctor.



This is not ideal for any community, particularly the elderly and vulnerable members.

In neighbouring Atherton, the reported closure of a family medical centre due to the retirement of the practice's long-serving doctor is leaving hundreds of people without a private doctor, and creating enormous issues for the remaining private practices who are working to fill the void.

There is a wide pay differential between Queensland Health and the community sector, with the latter struggling to match remuneration packages offered by the government.

Like many other rural and regional communities, there is a lack of housing in Mareeba which, unfortunately, exacerbates the difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled health professionals. This is contributing to a limited pool of available health professionals.

In Mareeba, the community has been proactive for some time, and galvanised its efforts to work towards a community-owned healthcare facility. This approach has been driven by a need to improve health services, however, notwithstanding this, more needs to be done ensure health services, public and private, meet the needs of rural and regional communities.

Agriculture

Mareeba is home to the fourth most significant fruit bowl in Queensland and a horticultural powerhouse in northern Australia. Yet this industry, worth more than half a billion dollars to the economy, has been crippled with the growing labour and skills shortage.

Growers battled their way through the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw an exodus of international seasonal workers the various commodities had come to rely on as a workforce. Crops went unpicked, and supply chains were disrupted. While Australia has "reopened", agricultural industries in the Mareeba region are still experiencing high levels of labour shortages.

Research

Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN) Far Northern Agricultural Workforce Manager, who operates under the auspices of FNQ Growers, conducted a project to gather anecdotal evidence from employers and employees on what they feel enhances or hampers the ability for attraction and retention of workforces on farm enterprises.

Information was gathered from 100 employers (small, medium and large) and 100 Australian/permanent resident employees already working on, or have worked for more than 6 months on a farm enterprise, an honest understanding can be captured from both perspectives, in order to help decision making within the far north region moving forward.

This information gathering has been attained in 2019 and also revisited 2021 post pandemic to see if there are any obvious differences due to the pandemic (knowing this has scaled up the shortage of non-Australian workforces able to be utilized).



The views did not change due to the pandemic.

The findings

There were notable differences between small, medium, and large enterprises, as this has an impact of how work hours are structured and can affect the age profile of both employer and employee. Farms tell of shortages in peak periods as well as off-peak periods.

- The key challenge for small farms is the ageing workforce, owner operator model and too many work hours with minimal HR skills/or marginal profit squeeze to employ
- The key challenge for medium enterprises is to avoid burning out employees once attracted.
- The key challenge for large enterprises is to sustain engagement (or provide pathways to growth) of a larger younger workforce profile.

Key reasons for leaving an employer are: (in priority order)

- **lack of future certainty, therefore inability to plan and grow**
- poor leadership
- lack of communication
- uncompetitive wages
- better career opportunities elsewhere

Developing a Skilled Agricultural Scholarship Program

By Leanne Kruss, Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN) Far Northern Agricultural Workforce Manager

Australian agriculture is a complex and sophisticated system. Its performance relies heavily on the quality of its people. The Australian agriculture sector inclusive of fishing and forestry, employed approximately 334,000 people and was worth \$67 billion in 2019-20. The sector aims to achieve \$100 billion in farm gate output by 2030.

The long-term capacity of northern agriculture to compete and succeed both domestically and internationally will be determined by the ability of northern farmers to recognize changing consumer preferences, adopt new technologies and production practices and maintain the sustainability of their operations by protecting their production environment.

This era of revolution (Industry 4.0) sees the use of agtech becoming more prevalent in farms and one of the primary uptakes is looking at ways to reduce the low skilled large-scale employee needs to reduce costs, and secondly, to be able to capture the data through the entire production line, to be able to use that data as a way of becoming price makers, not takers. Engaging with agtech specialists to better understand the capabilities of the technology and the benefits of adopting it is something that needs to be integrated through all of industry from the farm enterprise through to the service, supply, and value chain. Smart



agriculture and high-tech farming are quickly becoming the standard with the introduction of drones, sensors and the IoT.

The critical skills needed by the northern agricultural industry include advanced, capable and implemented business and technological decision making, integrated with the increased need for knowledge in automation systems. Future farming will require and rely on employees that can bring a different skill set and attributes with roles identified in:

- ❖ High tech agronomy and irrigation ability
- ❖ Climate, natural disaster and NRM high level technology skills
- ❖ Computer management and programming
- ❖ Apiarist advancements
- ❖ Specialized technician automation fields
- ❖ IT skills, big data inclusive of transparency, authenticity, traceability, and compliance
- ❖ Drones and satellite imagery decision making and solutions
- ❖ Non-Destructive Testing (NDT) Inspection - Infrared thermography
- ❖ Mechatronics and engineering
- ❖ Management, corporate governance and leadership,
- ❖ Marketing and global “story telling”

Australian rural communities are facing one of their biggest challenges ever in retaining young people to manage agriculture. This is further emphasised in the less populated northern regions. The long-term effect could be devastating. For all their resilience, rural communities face a challenging future if future generations continue to choose to find their ways elsewhere.

This scholarship program intends to do exactly this- an investment in the future of northern farming and an investment in our future workforce. It invests in the “human capital” of northern agriculture by developing well-informed, visionary agriculturalists to lead their industries into the future.

FNQ Growers wishes to develop, support and collaborate with the regions stakeholders to develop a structured pathway to agricultural industry scholarships for the north by developing a unique program that awards primary producers and its service industries with a world class skilled workforce, building capacity for individual producers, their businesses and the agricultural industry more broadly.

Key components of the scholarship program include, but are not limited to:

- That this scholarship program will become one of the most prized and respected offerings in the Australian agribusiness sector.
- An industry selection and interview panel nominated for the scholarship from leading northern industry experts and farm and supply chain leaders across all commodities. (“The employers”)
- Aims to highlight and address the complexity, depth, and interconnectedness of the workforce issues for communities, public and private sectors and how they apply in remote locations in northern Australia.
- Provide confidence to industry and enterprises to back their judgement and make the changes



necessary to grow by providing a future workforce with this knowledge and a career pathway to retain this knowledge.

- To build capacity in people to lead and innovate in northern Australia primary industries and their communities.
- Foster a pathway to continued future expansion of a sustainable scholarship program collaboratively with industry.
- Identifies and nominates agricultural jobs to attract scholar applicants to become permanent workers.
- Develops and provides a broad range of ongoing post scholarship options for further professional development as valuable resources for industry and community.
- Develops a pipeline of graduates from local high schools through tertiary study to industry roles in northern agriculture.
- Commitment to offer cadetships and internships to graduates from the university to industry in northern agriculture.
- Attracting and retaining skilled workers, with a real opportunity to ensure industry and employer inclusion programs could strengthen and create a skilled workforce pool.
- Industry is committed to offering this wonderful opportunity to several worthy young Australian students annually.
- The program will be a targeted way of investing directly into the advancement of northern agriculture. The benefits do not cease on the scholars' completion of the study. Rather, because of his or her experience, they will become committed to a profession in the north and plant the seed to a life-long involvement in agriculture driven by a thirst for continued learning. This is critical to the managed expansion and sustainability of a scholarship program and to the industry.
- Pathway to developing an enduring program, generation after generation of students with a passion for farming, a vision for their productive futures and the drive to make it happen with this unique learning experience.
- Future scholarship and incentive schemes should have a long-term vested interest in developing Northern Australia, be committed to a sustainable business presence that grows agricultural capacity and the economy in this regional area over the longer term.

Scholar Selection includes, but not limited to:

- Scholars would be selected as people who, through the application process, can show they are committed and passionate about agribusiness, farming, fishing or the supply chain.
- Are at the leading edge of technology enthusiasm and uptake.
- Want to be potential future leaders in one of the most influential agricultural regions in Australia.
- Scholars will have to show they have the capacity and desire to learn about the agricultural marketplace. They must impress the selection panel with their understanding, achievements, and drive to succeed and show vision for their future.

The student:

- Retaining our local students to develop a rural career.
- Retaining by reinvesting in the return of local students if they need to pursue study away from the

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- north to maintain a rural career.
- Attracting current or new students from other regions or metropolitan areas to the north to a rural career.
 - Be designed around an annual program throughout their study journey that provides annual opportunity to experience practical on the job training in the north throughout their study.
 - Fosters the development of strong rural networks, friendships and allows students to experience the unique working and lifestyle of rural and remote Queensland communities.
 - The scholarship program will be a free program to students, all travel, accommodation will be covered on the program for all practical experiences.
 - Establish lasting professional and personal relationships with community members and rural professionals

The region:

- Create a regionally invested model for rural workforce development (developing the human transitions in farming and the role of collaborative action in supported change)
- Develop the role of extension in rural change, learning systems and adaptation
- Develops multi-disciplinary research, development and extension in rural workforce innovation
- Provides growth in farming systems, developing decision-making, technology and change
- Provides input into the strategic issues facing rural industries in Northern Australia through strategic review processes of human and social capacity and a role in the development in the future of RDE in rural capacity building.

Affordable Housing

Affordable housing, or lack thereof, remains a major impediment to attracting and retaining a skilled workforce across many different industries in regional centres like Mareeba. Industries like health, tourism and agriculture are grappling with accommodation shortages, with the real estate boom reducing available stock.

On-farm accommodation would offer a reasonable stop-gap option for the agriculture industry. It's a cheaper option, reduces reliance on transport and assist in reducing anti-social behaviour as workers have opportunities for recreational activities such as fishing.

Encouraging on-farm accommodation options would reduce pressure on other accommodation options in or closer to town, making these available for professional people (i.e. medical professionals) or other skilled labour (accountants, managers), where required.

FNQ Growers is lobbying the Queensland Government to provide incentives to help farmers develop on-farm accommodation. This could be in the form of funding subsidies for amenity blocks or assistant with development application fees.

Local government has a role to play in encouraging the development of more residential blocks.

Conclusion



The Chamber and FNQG appreciate labour and skills shortages are currently endemic to much of Australia including regional and rural communities such as Mareeba. Its acknowledged there are a number of factors that, when combined, have led to the current crisis.

However, the Chamber and FNQG trusts the inquiry can put the spotlight on these issues and assist with the development of real and tangible short-term solutions, while a sustainable, long-term solutions are developed and implemented.

Sincerely

Joe Moro
President (Mareeba Chamber of Commerce)
President (FNQ Growers)