



Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Wednesday, 30 November 2022

Attention: Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia Committee

RE: Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce

Bowen Gumlu Growers Association (not-for-profit) is situated in the Whitsunday region of North Queensland. Our Association represents members that produce the largest Australian winter crops of fruit and vegetables. We are committed to ensure all aspects of horticulture growth and management are extended to all agribusinesses via relationships with our partners, government bodies, and industry groups. Our Association is dedicated to sourcing funding opportunities to deliver access to research, industry, and workforce development, as well as market access, Agri-tourism opportunities, technology education, and disaster management. Additionally, our Association hosts two extension officers; Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN Officer) and Regional Development Officer (RDO) who provide support and guidance for agribusinesses in the North region across all commodities in Agriculture and Aquaculture.

Background

The North Queensland agriculture workforce is faced with chronic labour and skills shortages due to mega-trends to include changing demographics, adapting to climate change, global disruptions, sustainability, and digitisation. The industry has observed an increased use and sophistication of agricultural technology to meet population growth and to provide ongoing access to high quality fresh produce. As a result of this workforce shift, some agribusinesses are being left behind due to workforce skills shortages. Whilst our primary focus is to attract and retain an Australian workforce across the Agriculture Industry, our Association acknowledges that our foreseeable future will require a high dependence on a migrant workforce to bridge a gap between the labour and skills workforce shortages. In addition, the increased competition across industries of available labour at both a local and international level has magnified the skills and labour workforce shortages and associated issues. Furthermore, the nature of farming across the North region provides two distinct peak production periods, resulting in limited uptake of local job seekers due the seasonality of the horticulture industry.

Staff shortages across most sectors have caused significant economic impacts, as businesses operate at a reduced capacity. Supply chain issues have compounded the problems and unemployment rates are very low in most areas across the region, reducing the pool of potential available employees. Infrastructure development is also impacted, as costs are high and product supply is restricted. The number of Indigenous businesses in this region is quite small, with many of them operating as sole traders with minimal or no employees.

Impact of COVID-19

Difficulties attracting and securing a reliable workforce magnified due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, structural obstacles which prolonged access to suitable skilled and unskilled workers pre-dated COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 caused notable disruptions of both seasonal and skilled workers, highlighting the overdependence on the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) Visa. The North region has observed a significant decline in the number of WHM Visa holders from 2019 to 2022 as a direct result of COVID-19. Whilst there has been a recent reported quarterly increase of WHM entering the country, it is anticipated that the backpacker numbers will be unlikely to return to the pre-COVID volume in the immediate future, with projections indicating a minimum of 3 years. In addition, across the North region, the agriculture industry predominantly relied on the 88-day visa

requirements to attract the volume of seasonal workers. The decision to combine this visa with tourism / hospitality has significantly reduced the volume of job seekers entering the agriculture sector. Furthermore, the incoming government's decision to renounce the Australian Agriculture Visa (AAV) has directly affected future workforce options for Agriculture in Northern Australia and a meaningful alternative solution must be found. As a result, there is an ongoing need for the federal government to support industry in developing new strategies to support workforce attraction, domestically and particularly abroad, to assist in ensuring there is a stable and diverse pipeline of workers that are able to work in our industry and support the continued growth of Northern Australia,

Labour Options

Our Association has observed an increase of enquiries from producers to gain information about migration workers, to include the PALM Scheme and skilled VISA options. Producers are emphasising the need to secure a reliable, productive, and skilled workforce. Further to this, producers have been seeking information surrounding utilising the PALM workforce through the approved employer process and entering into an agreement across enterprises to bridge the seasonal workforce gap. Across the North region, many producers have begun a shift in mindset, with producers engaging PALM and migrant workers, predominantly via approved labour hire providers. Whilst this shift has somewhat bridged a workforce gap, producers and labour providers have expressed extensive concerns in relation to an increase in employment abandonment, on-farm non-compliance increasing risk and WHS concerns, increase in domestic violence impacting upon local enforcement services, and an increase in health issues impacting upon local health services. As a result, there is a growing negative perception surrounding the reputation of the scheme, along with the perception of the workers themselves.

Diminishing Community Perception

Our Association is heavily invested to raise the profile of the migrant workforce cohort and to increase connectivity with support services to ensure this vulnerable workforce become immersed and highly valued within local communities. At present, there is a high risk of dehumanizing this workforce due to workforce shortages, misconceptions, and lack of awareness of the benefits of migration schemes. There is a growing need for local communities to showcase diversity and multiculturalism, with an emphasis of the positive impacts achieved in the country of origin of this workforce by gained financial benefits of working in the Australian agriculture industry. Across Queensland, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries are taking positive steps, with the recent appointment of Workforce Liaison Officers, who are tasked to support all stakeholders in the PALM Scheme to ensure positive outcomes for all. Whilst this appointment is incredibly positive, with the number of migrant workers anticipated to grow well into the foreseeable future, further investment towards liaison and pastoral support officers is crucial to support this workforce in country as well as supporting industry to lead foreign relations and meaningful cultural and economic exchange with the participant PALM countries.

Accommodation Barrier

The North region has observed an increase in population due to the migration from southern states. This population growth can also be attributed to the impact of recent weather events (floods) across southern regions, and a reduced availability of building materials and skilled tradespersons to undertake building works in the region. This population growth has seen an increase in housing and rental prices and a reduction of available housing for seasonal workers. Whilst sourcing labour remains a significant problem, accommodation is now the greatest barrier to securing a workforce across our region. There has been an observable increase in producers expressing an interest in purchasing hostels / motels, housing in local communities, or funding accommodation solutions on-farm to address the accommodation crisis (various scales due to size of enterprise), posing significant financial burden upon producers. Additionally, the recently communicated family accompaniment enables long-term PALM workers who have the agreement of their employer to bring their families to Australia. Whilst there has been widespread support across the North region of this initiative, the viability remains questionable, and will further exacerbate social and economic challenges across the North Region to include housing, education, and health care systems. As a result, there is a critical need to provide producers with affordable and timely accommodation solutions, of which all levels of government need to be key players.

Growing Skills Shortages

Across the Agriculture Industry, there has been significant shifts in occupations and skills to support the emerging nature of modern farming practice, resulting in an increased demand for professionals, technicians, and paraprofessionals. This shift has dramatically changed the required skillsets, emphasising digital literacy, data

management, monitoring, interpretation and communication, cyber security, digital infrastructure planning, and technical operation skills. Whilst there has been a significant shift in occupations and farming practices, these emerging occupations and skillsets remain widely misunderstood, especially across the Indigenous population. Regional areas have always struggled to retain staff, especially the younger cohort, often due to higher wages and perceived greater opportunity in the larger cities. The fact the younger cohort often need relocate to the larger cities to complete tertiary education, remains an ongoing barrier to retention in regional communities.

The Queensland Workforce Strategy (2022) articulates a commitment to reform the VET sector by identifying school-to-work transitions, as a mechanism to produce vibrant communities and to establish a robust, skilled, and diverse workforce. The closure of Agriculture Colleges has significantly impeded upon the school to work pathway. Our Association has observed a growing need to support Vocational Education Training in schools, as one cog in this school to industry supply chain. Ongoing investment and prioritisation to build infrastructure and human capital towards connecting schools and local Indigenous populations with industry will remain critical during this hybrid model from low-skilled to high-skilled workers across the agriculture industry. To empower and upskill there is a need for accessible and affordable training for local indigenous people. Furthermore, to address the growing skills shortages, improvements towards access to Commonwealth supported skills training is required to ensure our region remains competitive in attracting and retaining PALM scheme workers, in particular supporting funded training to those workers on the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) VISA or those under the proposed Family Accompaniment and Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV).

Summary

Growers across the North Region are desperate for workers at all levels and stages of their production, from farm management to seasonal harvest workers. Workforce shortages have resulted in reducing crop sizes and produce remaining unpicked, increasing the cost of living for everyday Australians. The impact of COVID-19 will continue to be heavily felt across industry for many years to follow, thus highlighting the need to address workforce issues collaboratively and as a priority. As the industry journeys throughout this period of rapid change, access to migrant workers and the ongoing need to support this highly vulnerable workforce will remain critical, along with an investment towards supporting school-to-work transitions and addressing housing challenges.

Sincerely

 Ry Collins

Chief Executive Officer
Bowen Gumlu Growers Association