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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

Dear Committee Members,

RE: Inquiry Into migration in Regional Australia

Our business is a vertically integrated horticultural operation located in the heart of the Goulburn Valley in Regional Victoria, in operation since 1949. We grow apples and pears on 730Ha of company owned farms in and around Shepparton, as well as Harcourt near Bendigo. We operate a pack house and cool storage facility in Shepparton where the fruit from company owned farms, along with fruit from local family farms is held in cold storage prior to packing and marketing. Our business supplies fresh apples and pears to the Australian supermarkets, as well as exporting to various countries including New Zealand, South East Asia, United Kingdom, Europe and USA.

To operate a business on this scale there is a large requirement for both skilled and unskilled labour in the pack house, and in particular on the farms. Most positions required are unskilled. Across the entire business we employ 460 full time equivalent, with a peak requirement in excess of 1,000 people during the harvest period. The harvest of apples and pears in our region commences in late January and continues through to June. Once the harvest is completed there is a requirement for staff to prune the fruit trees over winter, commencing in June through to September. From October through to December there is a need for staff to hand thin the apple crops to ensure the trees are carrying the desired number of fruitlets to provide the correct size of fruit at harvest. In the pack house operation, there is a requirement for staff for the full 52 weeks of the year to meet the Australian retail customer needs, and current export programs.

Within our orchard division we operate with a core team of full time Farm Managers, Supervisors, Leading Hands and General Labourers. Due to the variable nature of people required we are unable to directly source the large number of staff required for harvest, pruning and thinning activities, so we work with and engage the services of around twelve

labour hire firms. These firms provide staff from within the local communities (mostly from migrant backgrounds), as well as using people on working Visa's. It is very difficult to source local unemployed to fill the farm positions, as the work is carried out in the field during difficult climatic extremes, requiring fit and healthy people. For our packhouse operations we have more consistent requirement, so the staff for this business unit is directly employed by our company. The pack house staff is made up from people living in the local communities, as well as people travelling through with working Visa's

The Goulburn Valley has a long and successful history of migration over the last 100 years or so, with many of these multi-generational migrant families now operating businesses that are local, national and international. These families have been successful in their new chosen country due to their hard work ethics, and willingness to adopt values and customs of their local communities. They have integrated well into their chosen community, whilst at the same time retaining, celebrating and sharing their own cultural heritage. The local community is a much better place because of them.

Our company has only had positive and productive experiences in sponsorship of migrant families over many years. In our farming operations we have sponsored various Albanian families who have all gone on to become Australian residents, with one of these families still working for our business after 20 years. Another of the families have gone on to purchase their own farm where they are growing apples and walnuts, as well as operating a Labour Hire business. We have also sponsored several families in our fruit packing operations, and again have only had positive experiences.

- We would like to see the Federal Government adopt policy settings where new migrants are incentivised to live and work in regional communities.
- We would like to see the work and holiday visa opened to more countries
- We would like to see seasonal worker program opened to more countries
- We would like to see a new visa class created for work rights and permanent residency in regional and rural Australia

Thank you for taking the time to consider our submission.

Yours sincerely

Garry D Parker
Managing Director
Geoffrey Thompson Holdings Limited