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## ISSUES PAPER

WWOOF - Willing Workers on Organic Farms

### Volunteering for 2<sup>nd</sup> Working Holiday Visa Extensions

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## Issue

Removing volunteer work from the 2<sup>nd</sup> WH Visa eligibility framework will adversely impact everyone in rural and remote Australia, economically and culturally, it will also adversely affect WHM who want to volunteer.

### Executive Summary

Travellers wishing to volunteer and those experiencing difficulty gaining their 88 days of eligible paid full time work currently join Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) to volunteer for WWOOF Hosts in order to qualify. Many enjoy volunteering and continue WWOOFing beyond 88 days into their second year in Australia. They experience a safe cultural exchange with Australian families while learning new skills and benefiting small subsistence organic farms at no cost to taxpayers.

Accreditation of voluntary work through legitimate organizations (such as WWOOF) would solve exploitation issues and allow travellers to qualify for visa extensions while volunteering if that is their choice. We recommend development of a 'Volunteer Pay Slip'<sup>1</sup> to provide a record of volunteer work ensuring an accurate documentation of time spent volunteering on eligible Host properties.

### Background

The WWOOF Australia program has operated for over 34 years, with over 2600 host properties where volunteer members exchange 4-6 hours work for all food and accommodation. This is the international standard for WWOOFing. There are 60 WWOOF Groups worldwide<sup>2</sup> and all adhere to this basic principle. 11,000 – 12,000 people join WWOOF yearly to volunteer as 'WWOOFers' on these properties, 89% are visitors from overseas, 60% are female<sup>3</sup>. These volunteers travel around Australia WWOOFing for various lengths of time on WWOOF Host properties during their membership. The length of stay at each property varies according to the arrangements they make with their Hosts, but averages about 2 months.

Host properties must be growing or producing using organic, permaculture or biodynamic principles. Around 10 to 15% are Certified Organic or Biodynamic, and a number are in conversion to Organic or Biodynamic Certification<sup>4</sup>. Many are commercial farms, and a great number of these are small holdings with one person working off the farm to keep the farm going. Many are Hobby farms; some are in regional urban fringe areas. Often Hosts have a mixture of paid workers and volunteers, but many cannot afford to pay workers at all. If these operators do not have volunteers, tasks either do not get done, or the operators work incredibly long hours to do the work on their own. Organic Farms are very labour intensive, for example hand weeding takes the place of spraying chemicals.

Many WWOOFers travel on a Working Holiday Visa, we estimate 3000 to 4000 WWOOFers are working towards securing their 2<sup>nd</sup> Working Holiday Visa yearly. These WWOOFers would generally stay on Host properties for longer in order to gain their required 88 days. This enhances their value to Hosts as they stay long enough to gain skills to assist the farmer more effectively.

### The size of the organic market

The Australian organic market, currently valued at \$1.72B is 1.25% of the conventional market, it covers 22M ha of certified organic land (51% of world's organic land). The market has been growing since 2008 at 15.4%pa (AOMR 2014)<sup>5</sup>. It is the fastest growing agricultural industry with on-farm premiums of between 75-300%.<sup>6</sup> WWOOFing provides an opportunity for small scale organic farming operations to start up. It assists those businesses with annual sales under \$40,000 and does this without any financial assistance from government.

### Gaining Skills

Working Holiday Visa holders have rarely driven a tractor, erected a fence or picked an apple and have few, if any farming skills. It is difficult to pick enough fruit to cover their food and accommodation costs or acquire paid employment without the required skills. Volunteering offers the opportunity to gain these skills. WWOOF hosts are required to provide all food and clean accommodation no matter how many apples are picked or metres of fence erected. They must also provide a safe environment for the WWOOFers, and risk removal from the program if they do not comply.

### Exploitation is not a WWOOFing issue

WWOOF supports initiatives to prevent exploitation of people seeking to gain their second Working Holiday visa, but considers it unreasonable and ineffective banning volunteer work to achieve this. A ban on volunteering with recognized, well established organizations will not address the issue of short-lived labour hire companies underpaying paid workers. WWOOF Hosts have been a rescue squad for many years, taking WWOOFers into their homes and hearts, giving them a taste of true Australian hospitality and a cultural experience unmatched by staying in backpacker Hostels. Feedback from WWOOFers and Hosts is overwhelmingly positive.<sup>7</sup> WWOOFers are free to leave immediately if they feel uncomfortable and Hosts can ask WWOOFers to leave if there is a problem. Serious complaints are dealt with quickly by implementing our Complaints Procedure<sup>8</sup> and the Host or WWOOFer is removed from the program to uphold the integrity of WWOOF and ensure no exploitation takes place. If an incident is reported by a third party it is followed up with the



WWOOFer or Host concerned and the issue is addressed and resolved. Any breach of Immigration (DIBP) rules, such as visa holders offering to pay to falsely record the number of days worked, is passed on to the Department for follow up, if it is brought to our attention.

### **Support for the WWOOF Program**

WWOOF instigated an online Petition<sup>9</sup> to Peter Dutton asking that volunteering continue to be a recognised activity for the visa extension. As at 1/9/2015 there are 4144 signatures supporting this petition. The Organic Federation of Australia and many others support the inclusion of volunteering; please see the Appendix for details.<sup>10</sup>

### **Learning about the Australian way of life**

Hosts include WWOOFers in their farm life, often taking them on outings to local attractions, markets, wineries and dances; they provide them with internet access, so they may maintain contact with family and friends. On returning home, WWOOFers overwhelmingly report on their Australian experience as being a wonderful time in their lives, and unwittingly or deliberately act as ambassadors for this country.

The WWOOF Program delivers a cultural exchange which is the stated objective of the Working Holiday Visa. These Visa holders will continue to be allowed to volunteer, but the negative impact of these changes to the 2<sup>nd</sup> WH Visa will seriously affect our Hosts and WWOOFers if volunteer days do not count towards visa extensions.

### **Value of WWOOFing**

Working Holiday Visa holder numbers are down 5.8% in 2014 on the 2013 year<sup>11</sup> and WWOOFer numbers have fallen too. We are concerned this change will significantly diminish WWOOFer numbers further leaving many Hosts struggling to keep their farms going. Without the enticement of the visa extension many will not join WWOOF.

Each backpacker spends an average of \$5,294 in Australia, \$3209 of this in rural areas<sup>12</sup>, the value of WWOOFers to the Australian economy is 12,000 x 5,294 is \$63.5M, with \$38.5M being spent in rural communities, along with any money they earn while they are here. The more time they spend in rural and regional areas the more these economies are simulated, helping support the tenuous job situations in Regional Australia. They also bring a diverse range of cultures that adds to the multicultural experience of rural areas. Each farm that remains viable because of the help they get from their WWOOFers means money from these farms and their families stays in their rural economy, their children stay in local schools and flow on jobs are also connected to this.

### **Safeguards**

Fair Work Australia is preparing a report about conditions for people working towards Visa extensions. We understand this report will not be presented until late 2015 and were surprised at the DIBP's announcement (ironically made during National Volunteer Week) as it seemed premature. Garry Ainsworth, WWOOF Managing Director and I met with Fair Work Australia as part of this investigation and discussed issues surrounding exploited workers and how the WWOOF program worked. They were impressed with the WWOOF Program and asked for recommendations to make Visa Extensions easier to manage for Hosts and WWOOFers. Our recommendation was allowing WWOOFers to volunteer for the International WWOOF standard of 4 to 6 hours per day, or 6 hours per day with a maximum of 38 hours in a week, so it would not be longer than regular full time hours. This would allow all WWOOFers to do the same number of hours and remove confusion when several WWOOFers are at a host property with some working towards their visa and others doing regular WWOOFing.

Working Holiday Visa extensions were implemented to encourage backpackers to work in regional areas doing seasonal work. This is physically demanding and often difficult for young backpackers from city backgrounds with no prior experience of hard physical work. Real farmers need skilled workers if they are paying award wages; making it difficult to secure paid work other than at piece rates which is poorly paid for the inexperienced. Volunteering fills this need, giving backpackers the opportunity to qualify for their visa extension without the pressure of paid employment. WWOOF Hosts tailor tasks to volunteer's abilities and take the time to teach new skills.

### **The way forward, a workable solution: a 'Volunteer Pay Slip'**

The Government's desired outcome of this change is to ensure all visa extension applications have pay slips to prove they worked and were paid the award rate for their 88 days to prevent exploitation. WWOOF is keen to work with the DIBP to come up with an alternative 'Volunteer Pay Slip'<sup>13</sup>, either on-line or on paper that would provide a daily or weekly record of volunteer work to ensure there is an accurate record for each volunteer in place of a pay-slip to document time spent volunteering and the type of work done on each eligible Host property. It is our recommendation that accreditation of voluntary work through legitimate organizations, such as WWOOF Australia, could be registered with DIPB, would solve the issue of exploitation and allow travellers on Working Holiday Visas to qualify for visa extensions while volunteering if that is their choice.

Please see the Appendix for supporting documents.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 4.5

<sup>2</sup> WWOOF around the World: <http://www.woof.com.au/woofers/world-woofing> <http://woofinternational.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Appendix 4.1, 4.3 & 4.4

<sup>4</sup> Appendix 4.4

<sup>5</sup> AOMR 2014 – Report <http://austorganic.com/ao-market-report/>

<sup>6</sup> Aust exports and feeds 60 million: The Commonwealth of Australia 2014, Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper, Canberra, February <http://agwhitepaper.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/ag-wp-chpt5-accessing-premium-markets.pdf> "By 2060, over one billion people will shift into the middle classes in the developing Asia region alone (Hajkowicz & Eady forthcoming). Future growth in global demand presents a significant opportunity for Australian agriculture, as populations and incomes increase in developing countries (Gray, Oss-Emer & Sheng 2014). **Australia currently feeds around 60 million people globally each year** (PMSEIC 2010). We cannot hope to be the food bowl of Asia, but we produce far more food and fibre than can be consumed here in Australia. As a net agricultural and food exporting country, we can, and must, capture a greater share of the growing demand in our region. Population of Asia = 4.99B –(Google) Calculation - We can feed 1.2% of this population, so if Australia went organic we couldn't supply wealthiest 2% of Asia with certified organic food

<sup>7</sup> WWOOF Feedback: <http://www.woof.com.au/testimonials>

<sup>8</sup> WWOOF Complaints procedure: <http://www.woof.com.au/woofers/complaints>

<sup>9</sup> WWOOF Petition: <https://www.change.org/p/peter-dutton-senator-the-hon-michaelia-cash-include-volunteer-work-activities-such-as-woof-in-the-eligibility-for-2nd-working-holiday-visas?>

<sup>10</sup> Appendix 1, 2 and 3

<sup>11</sup> Working Holiday Maker Visa Program Report 30/6/2104

<http://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/working-holiday-report-jun14.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> International Visitors in Australia, March 2015 Quarterly Results of the International Visitor Survey

[http://www.tra.gov.au/documents/ivs/International Visitors in Australia March 2015 Results of The International Visitor Survey.html](http://www.tra.gov.au/documents/ivs/International%20Visitors%20in%20Australia%20March%202015%20Results%20of%20The%20International%20Visitor%20Survey.html)

<sup>13</sup> Appendix 4.5