



Dr Kaya Barry
Griffith Centre for Social
and Cultural Research
170 Kessels Rd, Nathan campus
Griffith University, Queensland 4111
Australia
k.barry@griffith.edu.au
07 3735 7317

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

06 February 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'. My current research¹ investigates the experiences of temporary migrant farm workers in regional Queensland. Having spent many months during 2019 and 2022 conducting interviews with migrant workers, as well as with representatives from local businesses and communities that employ and support them, I have seen first-hand the immense contribution that migrants bring to regional places.

My submission addresses two main areas in the Terms of Reference:

Point 3. Attraction and retention strategies for working migrants to Australia;

and relatedly,

Point 2. Immigration as a strategic enabler of vibrant economies and socially sustainable communities in our cities and regional hubs.

In this submission I draw primarily on research that I have recently published in a 2023 report: *Turbulent Times: The State of Backpacking and Seasonal Farm Work in Australia*,² which summarises the findings of 45 interviews with stakeholders across industry, government, and community organisations in regional Queensland. The findings show the vital need for permanent migration opportunities to be increased for migrant farm workers. A shift from temporary visa programs to permanent migration would benefit individual migrants, diaspora communities, regional economies, and strengthen Australia's agricultural industry.

Context – temporary migration in farm work

The agricultural sector, which is predicted to contribute \$82 billion to the Australian economy this financial

¹ I receive funding from the Australian Research Council – Discovery Early Career Researcher Award, 2022-2025 (project number DE220100394).

² Available at: https://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/1686104/Turbulent-Times_The-state-of-backpacking-and-seasonal-farm-work_2023-report.pdf

year, relies heavily on seasonal migrant workers who are on temporary visas. The two main visas for farm workers are the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM).

The Working Holiday Maker visa (subclasses 417 & 462), commonly known as the “backpacker” visa, attracts young people up to 30 years of age³ for an initial year, which can be extended up to three years. Backpackers have become a staple source of farming labour,⁴ due to the engineering of visa extensions granted in exchange for “specified work”.⁵ WHMs are initially granted a one-year visa, but this can be extended to two years if three-months of specified work is undertaken (usually in farming, but also incorporates tourism and other designated regional jobs), and a final third-year can be extended after an additional six-months of approved work. In combination with pandemic visas and bridging visas, some WHMs end up spending *more than three years* living and working in regional farming communities.

Prior to the pandemic, more than 140,000⁶ backpackers came to Australia, and many stayed for a second or third year while undertaking farm work. Although the return of backpackers has been slower than anticipated⁷ since Australia’s international border reopened in early 2021, more than 100,000 WHM visas had been granted at the end of December 2022.⁸ Their long-awaited return is a relief to many farmers and regional towns that rely on their labour, spending, and tourism for survival.

Alongside the backpackers is the newly launched Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme⁹ that caters for nine Pacific Island nations and Timor-Leste. The visa is open to people aged 21 years and over, and unlike the backpacker visa, many participants on the PALM scheme have families, children, and dependents back home. PALM workers are tied to one employer for either a seasonal nine-month contract, or between one-four years, and are largely working in agriculture in regional and remote areas.

Importantly, neither of these visa programs has existing pathways to permanent migration, despite their medium-term duration (three or four years) and the essential labour that they deliver to regional hubs and industries.

Retaining working migrants

My research has found that the majority of WHMs would like to migrate permanently to Australia if they had the opportunity. In 2019 I interviewed 82 farm workers in the Bundaberg region of Queensland who were on temporary visas (40 of which were WHM visa holders),¹⁰ and all said they would like to stay in Australia long term. Many backpackers interviewed said they were actively looking for sponsorship opportunities from employers, or were considering transitioning to a student visa to extend their time.

Migrants in seasonal farm work form long-lasting friendships and relationships with other workers, locals from their workplace and community, and stay in low-skilled farming employment for months, sometimes years, living in regional areas.

³ WHM visas are eligible for ages 18-30, or up to 35 years for Italian, Danish, Irish, Canadian, and French nationals.

⁴ Dufty, N. et al. 2019. *Demand for farm workers: ABARES farm survey results 2018*. Available at: https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/abares/DemandForFarmWorkers_FarmSurveys2018_v1.0.0.pdf

⁵ Dept. Home Affairs. 2022. *Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program*. Available at: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/whm-program/overview>

⁶ Dept. Home Affairs. Dataset BP0017 *Working Holiday Maker visas granted*. Available at: <https://data.gov.au/data/dataset/visa-working-holiday-maker/resource/1838d35d-8523-45e4-945a-11c584f3324b>

⁷ Barry, K. 2021, Nov 4. Australia’s borders are open, so where are all the backpackers? *The Conversation*.

Available at: <https://theconversation.com/australias-borders-are-open-so-where-are-all-the-backpackers-192614>

⁸ Dept. Home Affairs. Dataset BP0017 *Working Holiday Maker visas granted*.

⁹ PALM consolidates exiting similar visas: the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme.

¹⁰ See two publications based on this data: Barry, K. 2020. Momentarily immobile: Backpacking, farm work, and hostels in Bundaberg, Australia. *Geographical Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12445> Barry, K. & Iaquinto, B.L. 2022. Hostel frictions: backpackers living under lockdown. *Mobilities*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2062256>

Illustrative case: essential workers but no easy path to permanent migration

Several participants I interviewed in 2019 remained in Australia throughout the pandemic border closures. One backpacker from Sweden, and another from South Korea, both stayed living and working in regional farming jobs, as they were deemed “essential workers”. When I spoke to the Swedish backpacker in a follow-up phone call in early 2021, they told me that their temporary visa status weighed heavily on their mind during lockdowns. Locked out of any government support like JobKeeper, and with limited flights out of Australia, they told me they felt they had no choice but to remain working on the farms, “at least it is good pay”, they said. “I feel like I live here, like, I feel part of the community”.

In November 2022, I spoke with each of them again. The backpacker from South Korea said they were “so lucky” as they had found an employer who assisted with completing a short certificate course to upskill, alongside their farm work, and was now in a sponsored job and is on a pathway to Permanent Residency. “I never want to leave Australia”, they said. For the backpacker from Sweden, who is on their final (third) year of their WHM visa eligibility, prospects to remain in Australia are less clear. “There’s so much work around, farmers are begging you to stay, offering more pay”, they told me. Despite working on farms in Australia since 2019, the Swedish backpacker said that their current skillset, of largely “unskilled” farming work, does not make it easy for an employer to sponsor them for any pathway to permanent residency.

In interviews conducted during 2022, farmers shared similar stories of how they had seen good, dedicated workers who they’d known for several years, being forced to depart Australia because their visas were ending. “Unless they have specific qualifications, or are willing to do more study, most [workers] don’t meet current sponsorship criteria”, one farm manager explained in an interview. The Horticultural Industry Labour Agreement established in early 2020¹¹ is an option for employers to sponsor migrant workers who have specific skills, but it is a lengthy process that takes several years. Several farmers I interviewed said they were uncertain about whether it would “guarantee” permanent residency at the end of the process.

Farmers across the country, who are experiencing unprecedented significant labour shortages,¹² no doubt have similar frustrating stories about losing workers due to visa time ending. Recent academic research shows that farm work is incorrectly assumed to be “low-skilled” or “unskilled”.¹³ Further, the current visa and sponsorship structure seems to have little value placed on the knowledges that workers gain in farm work roles,¹⁴ let alone the importance of retaining dedicated and proficient workers in low-skilled farm jobs who are willing to remain in regional places through permanent migration.

Immigration that focuses on regional hubs

Migrants have been a long-standing part of farming communities in regional towns and hubs, and have, over the decades, become integral, long-term members who integrate and shape regional Australian life.

Many farmers and accommodation providers that I interviewed had signed up to the PALM scheme during 2021 and 2022, replacing their seasonal workforce that used to be made up of WHMs with a more certain and longer-term contract that ensured a supply of Pacific Island workers into regional hubs. This shifts the focus from one temporary visa cohort to another, but does nothing to resolve issues and uncertainties that working

¹¹ Dept. Home Affairs. 2020. New Horticulture Industry Labour Agreement. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/skilled-migration-program/recent-changes/new-horticulture-industry-labour-agreement>

¹² National Farmers Federation. 2022. Jobs Summit yields incremental gains, but a plan to fill 172,000 ag vacancies remains elusive [media release]. Available at: <https://nff.org.au/media-release/jobs-summit-yields-incremental-gains-but-a-plan-to-fill-172000-ag-vacancies-remains-elusive/>

¹³ Klocker, N. et al. 2020. Exploring migrants’ knowledge and skill in seasonal farm work: more than labouring bodies. *Agriculture and human values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-019-10001-y>

¹⁴ Dun, O. et al. 2018. Recognising knowledge transfers in ‘unskilled’ and ‘low-skilled’ international migration: Insights from Pacific Island seasonal workers in rural Australia. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12198>

migrants face about future migration prospects. My research has identified that most people in regional communities who are involved with migrant farm workers – farmers, hostel and accommodation operators, support services, and community groups – would all like the government to create easier and realistic pathways to permanent migration as a reward and goal for dedicated migrant workers.

Overwhelmingly, the interviews show that for those workers who do live and work for significant time in Australia, their contribution is valued and is essential to the Australian economy and society. They want to remain permanently, yet there are few options for this to be an achievable dream.

It is welcome that the Albanese government promised last year to develop permanent migration pathways¹⁵ for *some* Pacific Island workers on the PALM scheme. However, other agriculture-labour focused visas, such as the Working Holiday Maker, should be part of future migration policy changes. It is imprudent that migrant workers in such under-staffed areas such as agriculture, are being denied additional visa time, let alone opportunities to migrate permanently and remain as key contributors to Australian regional life.

Recommendations:

- **Build permanent migration pathways into the WHM and PALM visas, which are integral to the nation's agricultural workforce.**
- **Increase sponsorship opportunities for low-skilled but essential jobs in agriculture, so that working migrants can have realistic pathways to permanent migration.**
- **Recognise time that migrant farm workers spend working and living in regional communities, which often spans significant years while in “seasonal” and casual work.**

Should you require further information on the matters raised in this submission, please contact me via email or phone. I would be happy to provide further insight or information for this important and timely inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Kaya Barry

¹⁵ Wong, P. 2022, Apr 26. Labor's Plan for a Stronger Pacific Family [media release]. Available at: <https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-hub/media-statements/labor-s-plan-for-a-stronger-pacific-family/>