

26th November 2002

Review Secretary
Stephen Dyer
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

Dear Mr Dyer,

In response to your letter of 6th November, following are comments pertinent to the Gulf Savannah region. These comments relate to dot pints 1, 3 and 6 in your letter.

Knowledge of the government immigration procedures

Generally speaking, among local employers and groups there would be a broad lack of knowledge and understanding of the processes involved in immigration and the programs available.

Immigration is not an issue that Gulf Savannah Development has had to address, although we can see benefits arising from an increased availability of skilled labour. Businesses in the region for example are unable to expand through lack of skilled and reliable labour in such areas as refrigeration, mechanical engineering.

Hindrances:

The Gulf region would benefit from skilled migration, and indeed Carpentaria Shire has expressed a wish for immigration to the remote areas to be encouraged. However, to attract skilled labour to any area requires a certain level of services and support to be provided. Affordable and reasonable housing in remote areas is generally not available and migrant support services are located in centres distant from the region, Cairns being the closest.

Local government

Local government would be well placed to assist skilled workers settle in an area, although may require expansion of expertise in some areas to facilitate settlement, with the migrant resource centres being almost 900Km from the Gulf.

Current rate of settlement

The percentage of residents born overseas increased marginally in Etheridge Shire, declined marginally in Croydon and was static in Carpentaria in the last census. Across the Gulf the countries of birth are in order of predominance: UK, NZ, Germany, Netherlands. Essentially therefore language would not be an issue.

Life style issues

Migration programs seem to have a greater impact in the urban, more settled areas and as large business centres they obviously attract the majority of skilled settlers and temporary labour. One would expect that new settlers attracted to a region such as the Gulf would probably originate from a similar area and have an affinity with the environment, remoteness and lifestyle.

Potential benefits

While unemployment is at a high level, the towns of the Gulf Savannah would benefit from an injection of new expertise as an impetus to small business and light industry to diversify and create employment opportunities.

The main reasons new settlers would be attracted to the region would be either family and/or specialised professional job location (e.g. in the mining industry, medical profession or similar), however this would be on a very limited basis. From GSD's experience, the mining industry in the Gulf region has attracted skilled immigrant labour. With good prospects for further mining development in the north west region, this is one area that would attract skilled and specialist labour.

For the Gulf, the tourism industry is the most likely area where immigration and temporary entry programs will have an impact. An increasing number of backpackers are being attracted to the area. They find employment in the hospitality industry and provide an invaluable source of labour during the peak tourism season, when the local population is unable to keep up with demand.

Another area is the aquaculture industry where technical expertise will be required. Temporary entry visas would accommodate skilled and specialist workers in this area.

Temporary work visas

Working holidays could provide an avenue for expansion of skilled services in the region, in areas such as medicine, nursing, teaching, mechanical and auto services, tourism etc. This is an avenue that has not been explored as a means to meet the need for expertise in remote areas. While it is very difficult to attract professional people to the remote regions on a permanent basis, working visas and working holidays could, if properly managed, fill a gap.

However individual organisations or individuals would find such a solution to labour requirements difficult to manage, having to deal with all government requirements and 'red tape' in isolation. There would need to be a policy decision to establish an approved program for regional application, with guidelines and procedural mechanisms in place to facilitate the process.

As an example, the Queensland Government is intending to attract overseas nurses to work in the state, with Queensland Health hoping to attract nurses skilled in specialised areas and those wanting to work in specific regional areas. (Courier Mail 26/11/02). It is understood that the Queensland Government is accessing the skilled migrants database for this information.

A similar approach could be taken to facilitate skilled migration and temporary entry to meet other skills shortages in regional areas, particularly where there are new enterprises being developed. Hand in hand with this however would need to be infrastructure development such as housing and services.

Kate Sutcliffe
Chief Executive Officer