



Submission to
The
House Standing Committee on Employment
and Workplace Relations

Inquiry into regional skills relocation

April 2010

About Growcom

Growcom is the peak representative body for the fruit and vegetable growing industry in Queensland, providing a range of advocacy, research and industry development services. We are the only organisation in Australia to deliver services across the entire horticulture industry to businesses and organisations of all commodities, sizes and regions, as well as to associated industries in the supply chain. We are constantly in contact with growers and other horticultural business operators. As a result, we are well aware of the outlook, expectations and practical needs of our industry.

The organisation was established in 1923 as a statutory body to represent and provide services to the fruit and vegetable growing industry. As a voluntary organisation since 2003, Growcom now has grower members throughout the state and works alongside other industry organisations, local producer associations and corporate members. To provide services and networks to growers, Growcom has about thirty-five staff located in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Ayr, Townsville, Toowoomba and Tully. We are a member of a number of state and national industry organisations and use these networks to promote our members' interests and to work on issues of common interest.

The House Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations

The terms of reference for the inquiry are:

To inquire into and report on the applicability of government employment policies to address the skills shortages in regional Australia focusing on opportunities to support the relocation of unemployed workers from areas of high unemployment to areas experiencing skills shortages

1. Growcom and skills training

Growcom is pleased to provide this contribution to your inquiry, in the hope that our experiences in the Queensland fruit and vegetable growing industry will contribute to the committee's consideration of these issues. Our industry is very reliant on the willingness of workers to travel to the regions, and is also beset by skill shortages and other workforce peculiarities.

As part of our business advisory service to members, Growcom offers a full range of workplace advocacy products (including a workplace agreement-making service) and industry-specific training products, such as *Freshcare Food Safety and Quality (Fresh Produce)* code training courses. The Freshcare training suite

is an industry owned, quality assurance program that is accepted by many fresh fruit and vegetable packers, wholesalers, processors, and retailers, Australia-wide.

Growcom is also represented on the boards and committees of a number of Queensland's agricultural bodies and, as part of our overall industry monitoring role, we have also kept abreast of the skills training requirements and other workforce issues for Queensland fruit and vegetable growers over many years.

The horticulture industry is experiencing a period of significant change with the business environment becoming more challenging. The industry is recognising that training in both horticulture and business is becoming ever-more important as markets become more global and competitive, as new business opportunities and ways of improving efficiency become available, and as labour and skill shortages continue to constrain industry productivity and growth.

Farm owners, managers and employees need access to training and services to improve supply chain management, business management and leadership skills. These services will have to meet their requirements – usually be delivered locally - and provide them with the skills to allow their enterprises to remain viable and sustainable.

Growcom therefore supports systems and processes that enable all those involved in the industry to be good business managers and be competitive in the employment market. This means providing people with marketable skills, and developing education and training systems which keep pace with the skill needs of business and with changes in both farm practices and technology.

2. Growcom and skills training policy

Growcom is committed to taking a proactive stance in promoting relevant learning and development throughout the industry.

We will continue to work with government and other stakeholders to support training and development initiatives that benefit the industry. We are also committed to delivering training and education programs for the horticulture industry that will in turn deliver quality skills acquisition for Queensland growers.

To this end we welcome any government initiative designed to alleviate the skill shortages in regional Australia, including the House Standing Committee's current inquiry into relocation.

3. Government employment policies

The Queensland fruit and vegetable growing industry employs about 25,000 people at any one time, with peaks and troughs according to sowing and harvesting seasons.

While this workforce sustains many regional communities and economies in the state, the management of this workforce is fraught with difficulties, including:

- There are usually large distances to be travelled between farms
- There is a need to provide accommodation for many workers, both on the farms and in the towns
- These workers then depart after a few weeks or months
- Training programs need to be delivered, often in remote areas
- Language barriers remain high
- Workers need to be available at specific times dictated by seasonal conditions
- Availability of work is generally reliant on good weather conditions
- The infrastructure and social linkages of township communities are often strained.

The industry is in ongoing battle with these factors every season, and Growcom has been involved in many projects that attempt to “manage” this workforce and deliver productivity benefits to growers, including skills training and re-location strategies.

Unfortunately we are not able to offer any specific advice on successful policy initiatives, but rather provide the following observations and perhaps suggestions for the Committee as you consider options for government employment policies:

- In general terms we believe that government policies should be directed at prevention rather than cure. By that we mean early intervention to bolster the existing social and economic resilience in rural areas. We would be asking governments to attempt to reverse the decline in the regional economies and communities which is greatly contributing to the labor and skills shortages we are now experiencing in regional Australia.

As a specific starting point we would be encouraging governments to move their agencies out of south-east Queensland and into the regions, where possible and appropriate.

- Any relocation activity needs to be associated with training – rural areas will struggle to absorb unskilled people as local resources are already stretched.

We would therefore suggest that additional training be provided in association with re-location and that this be provided on-site, in the regional area.

- The re-location initiative should be accompanied by transition support from the local community. It is a big change to move from city to country and without locals supporting you it can be difficult to adapt to a new environment.

The program should be targeted to areas of highest need and should work with local governments, community groups and industry. In our experience it is also crucial that the relocation shouldn't be too far away from their original location as well. If people are only a short drive – within 4 hours – they have the ability to drive over a weekend to visit friends and relatives and retain some semblance of social continuity. This will often make the relocation more successful and sustainable.

- There needs to be a holistic approach to relocation as sometimes extended families will need to move. Therefore factors such as school capacity, housing, and spouse employment options need to be fully understood.