

Article for South East Premium Wheatgrowers Association advertorial in the Esperance Express newsletter, submitted 30 May 2011. DIAC regional outreach officer Steve Lanyi collaborated with the journalist on content for the article.

By Alex Paull

THE South Eastern Premium Wheatgrowers Association (SEPWA) is working together with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) to put together a template Labour Agreement for farmers in the southern Wheatbelt, which is set to simplify visa applications for semi-skilled migrant workers in the agricultural industry.

DIAC regional outreach officer Steve Lanyi said this template Labour Agreement was a first in Australia specific to mobile plant and machinery operators.

Mr Lanyi said the 457 visa program was being carefully assessed, as currently plant operators are not included as eligible occupations which complicates the application process.

“Growers can only employ permanent international workers as plant operators through a labour agreement or possibly under the regional sponsored migration scheme (RSMS),” Mr Lanyi said.

SEPWA executive officer Gemma Walker said it would be beneficial not only to local farmers, but it could be adapted to other farmers across Australia.

“As far as trying to set up immigration to help farmers in the region, SEPWA is leading the way,” Ms Walker said.

Ms Walker said currently it was tough for farmers to source labour, as they were in direct competition with the mining industry, so devising a template would make it easier for growers in the region.

“We’re also trying to attract migrant workers into the agricultural industry, so putting together an attractive package may not be able to compete with the mining industry in dollar terms but it means that it may be a lifestyle choice,” Ms Walker said.

“But it’s not just permanent labour we’re looking at, but also trying to get people to come back,” she said.

Cascade farmer Wayne Walter said the process at the moment was mainly time-consuming.

Currently, Mr Walter has one South African worker employed under the 457 visa program, but he said he normally had up to four workers during harvest and the process was too complicated.

“I think it’s important that the process is not just simplified, but sped up, that’s what we’d want to see,” Mr Walter said.

Mr Lanyi also noted that the recent federal budget had included several initiatives for regional employers including an increase in places under the regional sponsored migration scheme for the 2011-12 financial year. He also noted that the Department of Immigration and Citizenship would be undertaking negotiations with local government and community stakeholders to develop regional migration agreements (RMA) to address the specific labour needs of regional areas of Australia such as the Goldfields-Esperance area.