



Victorian Peach & Apricot Growers' Association INC

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President: Mr. James Cornish Secretary: Mrs. Barbara Coleman
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10th March 2006

The Secretary
John Carter
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Ph: 02 62773520 Fax: 02 62775706
Inquiry on Pacific region seasonal contract labour

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you at the request of the President and Executive of V.P.A.G.A. to support the concept of a Guest Worker scheme to bring in Pacific region seasonal contract labour as a means of ensuring sufficient labour for all seasonal work including fruit harvesting.

There are approximately 90 orchardists in the Cobram and Invergordon districts who employ fruit pickers during the period January to late March for piecework harvesting a large variety of stone fruits plus pears and apples, the peak demand being late February early March with many varieties maturing at that time. From mid March through to late April the demand for labour lessens to some degree.

To meet the demands by the Supermarkets, Cannery, retailers and most importantly the general public for quality products it is necessary to have sufficient numbers of skilled fruit pickers to pick each variety at its optimum quality.

Some growers have their own website to try and ensure sufficient labour, others rely on people who follow the fruit harvest trail (backpackers and early retirees) around Australia. Growers provide O H & S training to all workers, including fruit pickers, drivers of tractors and forklifts and chemical use procedures to provide a safe working place for all employees. Several properties provide accommodation or camping facilities for their seasonal workers, with a limited number also providing meals. All the above come at a cost to the employer so it is important that the people employed are prepared to work within the rules and regulations implemented for their benefit.

The changes to the visa regulations in November 05 seems to have worked well in encouraging backpackers to stay much longer in an area and in doing so have provided a more stable labour force with benefits to both the growers and picker.

The proposed Guest Workers scheme could be beneficial as an extra labour source, however we do have some reservations that we feel require attention before it is fully implemented. At present some fruit pickers arrive without the ability to understand or speak English which makes instruction in O H & S and work procedures very difficult. The workers would need to be coming to Australia by choice and need to be physically fit enough to handle the work. There needs to be careful consideration given to this project, including figures for the actual numbers required.

At present our growers have a good working relationship with the AWU and in order to maintain that relationship a Guest Worker scheme would need to be approved by the AWU.

Finally, should these potential workers be invited to Australia and employed by persons or businesses accredited to supply contract labour, we would like to see regulations in place to ensure that the workers receive the appropriate award wages and conditions in place at the time and are accorded the same treatment as any Australian worker.

Yours sincerely,

Barbara Coleman
Secretary

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