



ETHNIC COUNCIL OF SHEPPARTON AND DISTRICT Inc.

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Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Enquiry on Pacific Region Seasonal Contract Labour from the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District.

The Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District Inc. was established in 1978 as a non profit, community based service, comprised of elected representatives from the principal ethnic groups in Shepparton and surrounding districts. Ethnic Council representatives are immediately accountable to their ethnic community members.

The Ethnic Council became a legal entity in 1985 when it became incorporated under the Associations Incorporations Act of 1981. From 1985 the Ethnic Council expanded its original settlement and community services to include children's, family and landcare services. The Ethnic Council is a peak body whose mission is to promote and represent the social, cultural and economic well-being of ethnic communities in the Goulburn Valley Region through the provision of quality and innovative settlement, information and advocacy services.

The immediate geographical sphere of the Ethnic Council is the City of Greater Shepparton (COGS) in the Goulburn Valley area of regional Victoria. The Ethnic Council, however, contracts to deliver Services to the ethnic communities of the Goulburn Murray areas of regional Victoria, which includes the local government areas of the Shires of Moira, Mitchell and Campaspe.

Other submitters will no doubt provide information on the scale of the Horticulture and Tomato industries and the issues associated with sourcing harvest labour. The picking season now extends from November through May however seasonal labour is required at other times of the year for tasks such a pruning and crop preparation.

I understand that the GV Harvest Office processes up to 12,000 job starts each season with the urgency of crop demands creating an ongoing "crisis" situation with growers confronted by changing circumstances requiring labour immediately.

Historically seasonal itinerant workers who came from all parts of Australia provided the labour. In my childhood I recall the colorful characters from far North Queensland who in the off cane season came to the Goulburn Valley. The university students who worked the season between academic years and in more recent time the backpackers who bring a further multicultural feel to the valley. These backpacker, predominantly from Europe are a significant and substantial part of the labour supply during the picking season.

The Goulburn Valley has always been a target for immigration due to the irrigated agriculture, strong local economy and temperate climate. Initially the arrivals came from Europe, particularly from Southern Europe with the Italians, Turks, Greeks and Albanians being the larger groups. After the Second World War these groups came in larger numbers but other European groups also came in significant numbers.

From the late 1980's there has been a change with newer emerging groups, a thriving Sikh community from the sub continent, increasing numbers of Pacific Islanders, a strong Arabic speaking community of several thousand predominantly from Iraq and more recently African refugees from Congo and Sudan.

Most of these groups are heavily involved in the Horticulture and Tomato industries and are an accepted source of labour.

The Committee is specifically looking at the issue of Pacific Islanders providing harvest labour and in the view of the Ethnic Council this is an attractive proposition for the Islander community of Greater Shepparton. Many of the resident Islanders came to Australia via New Zealand and have settled into seasonal work, established a community association and are a recognized part of the regional community.

They are hard working, tend to reside in the smaller communities such as Murchison and are keen to preserve their culture and traditions. The Islanders are active in the work of the Ethnic Council through representation on the elected Board and by supporting a multicultural youth group with a focus on dance and performance.

The Council is confident the local islander community would be able to offer significant support to other Islander who may be part of a seasonal labour option. It may be an element when considering the merits of the proposal that a viable local Islander community may be critical to the success or otherwise of the scheme. Many of the local community provide financial support to relatives resident in Island countries such as Tonga, Samoa and Fiji and will see this proposal as a further economic support to those countries.

The Goulburn Valley, similar to other regions with intensive irrigated agriculture such as Griffith and the Sunraysia has a diverse multicultural community and a history of successful immigration and settlement.

The Ethnic Council is supportive of an appropriate Harvest Labour proposal involving the Pacific Islands and appreciates the opportunity to be heard by the Senate Committee.



Chris Hazelman

Manager

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