

SUNRAYSIA CITRUS GROWERS INC.

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HARVEST LABOUR DISCUSSION PAPER

SCG has been involved in harvest labour issues for some time now and the following discussion paper has been prepared to update SCG Directors on issues and form the basis for submissions to Australian Citrus Growers and the VFF Hort. Council who will be attending a NFF Round Table in mid March (17/3/05). The NFF Round Table will/should produce a discussion paper.

SCG has been pursuing a policy of “consistent message” to the various bodies within the debate so as not to send confusing signals to the Government from the horticultural sector.

SCG has identified four sources of harvest labour for discussion:

1. Guest Labour

The rest of the horticultural world uses imported labour. From time to time it is necessary to explore options for Australia. It could be a straight import of labour through to skills training as part of our international aid obligations.

DIMA have opposed this option in the strongest of terms. The concerns DIMA have expressed have been how to deal with issues such as housing, transport, language barriers, pay terms and very importantly managing risk of flight.

2. Back Packers

Australia allows young travellers to work providing their home country allows young Australians to work in their country.

The USA is a major source of young visitors who cannot work. For just a little while it was hoped the FTA would address this issue.

Back packers also pay 29% tax compared to Australia’s 13% and some do not have access to our medical benefits or the PBS. There have been studies done that show backpackers spend as they go and rural economies would benefit directly and effectively if the tax rate were 13%. By the time the 16% difference goes to Canberra it disappears before returning or providing any benefit.

A solution to short term labour shortages would be for DIMA to waive the “We will if you will” policy and allow US backpackers (or others) to work for short periods in specific places.

The issue of super payments has caused some discussion, with citrus growers favouring the unclaimed back packer super being returned to industry use, either to Hort R & D or for specific projects to benefit back packers working in the industry.

3. Unemployed and Disability Pension beneficiaries

We need to continue to find ways to encourage participation in the workforce. However, we need to be mindful of the unemployable factor and the risks this holds for farmers. Many of these long-term unemployed need considerable time to adjust to the workforce and a straight entry will generally fail.

This is the ever-vigilant option.

SCG views a continuing problem to be the time taken to return to benefits or to get onto benefits once the work has been completed.

4. Retirees and Aged Pensioners

This is the option that SCG most wants to pursue due to the large number of retirees around Sunraysia. Also the main harvest window is winter when most other workers have “followed the sun”.

This category of seasonal worker was decimated when the annual allowed limit was changed from annual lump sum to periodical reporting, fortnightly, as I understand it. Given the difficulties getting benefits from Centrelink and the vitally important Health Care card, most retirees don't bother to look for seasonal work any more.

This was a particularly useful source of labour as it was generally well trained and easy to manage and did not require accommodation.

The strategy being following by the state bodies to the NFF is to push all four options to advance options 2 and 4 by compromise as these have the least risk attached for farmers.

In Sunraysia recently, options 1 and 3 have been widely and publicly debated. It will be interesting to see whether we have any progress before the next economic downturn, which usually produces quality seasonal labour.

Conclusion

As I understand it the NFF plan to support their discussion paper by forming state working groups (approx. 6 people) to collate state based responses to the discussion paper. In Victoria VFF Horticultural Council President Colin McCormack will chair the working group.

For your information



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