

Media Release

From the Member for Mildura Russell Savage MLA

Tuesday, April 04, 2006

Overseas Labour unnecessary: Savage.

The Sunraysia Mallee Economic Development Board (SMEDB) and Mildura Rural City Council Chief Executive Officer, Phil Pearce, have once again shown they have lost the plot in promoting Chinese harvest labour, according to Member for Mildura, Russell Savage.

“While true local unemployment is running at 16% it is ludicrous to suggest importation of labour from overseas for seasonal work.”

According to Mr Savage there are 2 million Australians who are either unemployed or underemployed and anyone suggesting a need for the importation of guest workers under these circumstances has ignored local employment statistics.

“Centrelink is the biggest employer in Sunraysia which is an indication that there are a significant number of able bodied individuals who could undertake seasonal work. It is understandable that, when unemployment benefits are greater than seasonal wages the incentive is negligible; therefore, if the unemployment benefits earning threshold was enhanced this would be an inducement to encourage locals to undertake seasonal work – these are the measures the government should be focusing on.

“We must avoid a situation where migrant workers can undercut existing employment conditions and wages perpetuating a reliance on overseas employees – this represents a significant risk to local employees in the face of the Howard Government’s industrial relations measures which come into force this year.

“We must also consider that many overseas workers may abscond once safely in Australia without regard for their contracts adding to the existing problem of illegal migration and impacting adversely on the local economy.

“The Federal Government has already announced an extension of the reciprocal working holiday maker scheme to encourage more back packers and the like to undertake harvest labour and this arrangement has enjoyed some success to date.”

According to Mr Savage overseas labour is simply unnecessary in the current market.

“The support for overseas labour is similar to the support for the Deakin Project which sought the handover of large tracts of land to large corporations and superannuation funds at the expense of existing smaller growers with no consideration of the social consequences of such a move.

“I wrote to the federal government in February of last year indicating my opposition to the proposal to import Chinese harvest labourers and the response I received from Minister McGauran was that there was no intention of pursuing such a policy for China or anywhere else, however the initiation of an Inquiry on Pacific Region Seasonal Contract Labour indicates a softening of this stance.

“The VFF should be concerned by this proposal because it enhances the position of large scale developers at the expense of the smaller growers thereby ensuring their extinction on the basis that the SMEDB’s submission promotes harvest labour assistance to large corporations. This will be the end of small family farms in Mildura already struggling against the competitiveness of major developers and corporations.

“I will be reiterating my opposition to the proposal to import overseas harvest labour with the lodgement of a submission to the Inquiry on Pacific Region Seasonal Contract Labour.

“If harvest labour is imported there will be a lowering of wages and conditions in the industry and no local workers will want to seek employment under such circumstances,” he added.

ENDS...