

Submission from Burnett Shire Council, Bargara, QLD

12 April 2006

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
SG 52
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

FAX NO (02) 6277-5706

Dear Mr Carter

PACIFIC REGION SEASONAL CONTRACT LABOUR INQUIRY

With reference to the above Inquiry, I now supply you with the following comments :

- In the Burnett region the horticultural industry is a major economic driver and has the potential to have a major productivity increase because of the recently completed Paradise Dam.
- The driver and the economics of this region is to supply high quality, fresh and reasonably priced produce to our city counterparts.
- Labour shortages are experienced when we have good weather, high volume crops all coming at the same time. Wages paid to seasonal workers are very low and it is my opinion that these low wages should be tax free for casual workers in this industry.
- The conditions for most picking jobs (fruit and vegetable harvesting by hand) are in most instances very sub-standard because they are in the natural conditions, ie, no air conditioning, exposure to the elements, long repetitive hours in contact with dirt, juices, possible insecticides, etc.
- The social security system within Australia certainly has a major bearing on the ability to access workers as they have a choice whether to take this type of work or not, unlike in the early 60's where cane cutters or seasonal sugar workers annually migrated to Northern Victorian areas to harvest fruit and grapes.
- The issue that I see for Pacific regional contract labour is the unpredictability, ie, excellent crop needing a sizable workforce to harvest, hailstorms, no crop to pick or market price collapse, not worth picking.

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Our Ref.: ADM/192
Your Ref:

- An issue that would be onerous is the paperwork involved. Paperwork that would be required by bureaucracy into an issue such as Pacific seasonal contract labour would be endless, fruitless and downright inconvenient. This in my opinion would open the door for graft, misconduct and the possible exploitation of the workers. The policing of these arrangements and the repercussions for persons overstaying or displacement would again be horrendous.
- The requirement to put in place a support network for these contract workers to deal with issues such as medical, cultural, social and language to name a few, would require full financial backing by both Federal and State Governments.
- If Europe was to be the example for contract labour, then one has only to look at the racial issue, the community isolation and the rights of existing workers and migrant workers when assessing the possible impacts and conflicts.
- The major issue that I see in all of this is quarantine. This can be demonstrated by the orange issue at Emerald, the bananas in North Queensland and smut in sugarcane in Western Australia. Workers from the Pacific Islands tend to bring their own "traditional" food in its raw state and policing such an issue would again be an horrendous concern in itself for quarantine and customs officials.
- A problem that we do have is our city customers demand perfect fruit, cheap prices and in season, all year round.
- The effects on the economics of the Pacific nations, I believe, would be of major benefit as these seasonal workers would tend to accumulate earnings and send or take home the majority of their accumulated pay. This is in reverse to backpackers or existing seasonal workers who tend to spend their income at their place of earning, positive economic impact regionally.
- Whilst I support the concept of contract labour between Australia and the countries of the Pacific region in principle, the management and policing issues to me would be a major barrier to a beneficial outcome. The best outcome is either by incentive, ie, tax free areas and a mandatory obligation to take any kind of work if you are on social security. Alternatively, if you receive social security benefits your rights to earn extra funds over and above existing limits in this industry would have a positive social and economic outcome for our community.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance to you.

Yours faithfully

RAYMOND E DUFFY
Mayor of Burnett Shire Council