



United Pacific Islanders of Wide Bay

Submission to the Committee for Pacific Seasonal Workers

September 7th 2006



INTRODUCTION

United Pacific Islanders recently formed at the beginning of 2006.

Presently our members include migrants from the islands of
Tonga, Fiji, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Kiribati, Samoa,
Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, & Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Other members are Australian, including some
who identify as being descendants of South Sea Islanders,
and others are married to Islanders and have lived and worked in the islands.

We meet regularly, and our activities are very family-based.

Our vision is to promote island culture
to the people of the Wide Bay region through dance performance,
presentation of other arts & crafts,
and conduct of social gatherings such as *te umu*.

We are a member group of the Fraser Coast Cultural Consultative Group (Inc.).

KEY ASPECTS OF A PACIFIC ISLANDS SEASONAL WORKER PROGRAM

1. Any guest worker program provided to South Pacific Islanders should be primarily orientated toward the benefit of the worker and their family.
2. A guest worker program should not be viewed as a replacement for aid to respective island nations.
3. Guest workers should receive equivalent pay rates and employer benefits as Australian workers employed in the same field and at the same level.
4. This program should not be gender specific – our Australian members have in excess of 40 years experience as employers, managers, and supervisors in the Pacific. They have found that female Islanders are very hard-working and reliable workers. Indeed, females with family obligations – e.g. aged parents who rely on them for support; single mothers with school-aged children; etc. – prove to be particularly effective workers as they seek to better their family's future.
5. A program should be open to utilizing family groups. Family is a very important aspect of island culture and its importance extends well beyond the nuclear family. An ideal situation would be to accept family units with older children to assist the parents in contract picking.
6. The program should not be confined to areas that cannot access sufficient labour through alternative means in as much that it should provide access to the same areas that Backpacker labour already enjoys. Additionally-
 - Using Island labourer as a final stop gap measure and lower in the pecking order to backpackers would be completely inappropriate.
 - Pacific Island people hold much stronger cultural ties with Australia and would feel more a part of the Australian community than backpacking visitors.
 - Poor Third world Islander labour should be replacing affluent backpacker labour from European and Asian countries.

Some members have had experience of Islander teams working in areas around SwanHill, Robinvale, Mildura, and Griffith areas – farm enterprises preferred Islander labour because of their reliability and skill, and because their mode of operation as a unit proved the most effective work team.

7. A seasonal worker visa should -
 - Be for a period of no less than 6 months – a cost benefit analysis for workers would indicate that this would need to be the case to accumulate sufficient savings whilst also meeting travel, settling, and living expenses.
 - provide options for second or multi-year extensions for the benefit of both the employers and workers in regards to maximizing the utilization and reinforcement of skills developed.
8. Workers should receive part of their wage for their personal/ family use, and the remainder allocated to a trust account for their family to utilize back in their own country.

SUITABILITY OF PACIFIC ISLANDERS FOR SEASONAL WORK

NFF submission details “Type of Workers Required for Seasonal Employment”, and with an emphasis on possessing-

- The right attitude
- The right physical attributes
- Previous experience

We know that the sort of Pacific Islander attracted to such seasonal employment have the following attributes in comparison to the average backpacker-

- Work harder
- Will stay in specific regional areas longer
- Are more likely to return for consequent seasons
- Overstaying is less likely than for backpackers – especially if there is an opportunity for returning in one or more consequent seasons.
- Need the money more, and so are more diligent and keen in their work ethic
- Will provide an economic feedback loop – a major proportion of imports into the South and Central Pacific come from Australia – as Islanders spend the Australian earnings back home.

Pacific Islanders are typically-

- Accustomed to hard physical work, such as horticulture, building, and fishing – it is part of their daily life within their self-subsistence societies.
- Accustomed to working in hot weather

ADDITIONAL ITEMS IN RESPECT TO OTHER SUBMISSIONS

- Whilst there may be a “youth bulge” in urban areas of the Pacific, most of the youth of Pacific Islands have the opportunity to easily return to a gainful and productive lifestyle engaging in self-subsistence economies in their rural/outer-island homes (unlike youth within our own cities).
- The concept of targeting and selecting from rural areas is not necessary – most Islanders living in urbanised areas are able to claim a rural/outer island home.
- If proposals are to proceed further, the processes, ministries, and organizations involved must avoid being paternalistic and condescending towards both Islanders and their countries. Programs need to be fair and rewarding, and at every stage ruthless operators need to be excluded.

ADDITIONAL ITEMS IN RESPECT TO OTHER SUBMISSIONS (continued)

- Monitoring processes for any program need to be in place and include performance criteria that include a basis for measuring the level of impact upon the workers home communities. In this respect, Australian concepts of poverty, economic development, and community development will not always be applicable – whilst economically poor, Pacific Islands are culturally the richest countries in the world; in respect of environmentally sustainable development, they are presently positioned better than Australia to achieve desirable outcomes because they still maintain a substantial degree of self-subsistence economies; they have amongst the strongest communities in the world because individuals cooperate toward ensuring the health of their communities and facilitating the care and respect for their more vulnerable members (the aged and children). Any program for providing seasonal work needs to ensure that it does not undermine such aspects of island life, but actually assists in their reinforcement.
- Any establishing of a program should have not only the support of government, employers, and unions, but also community groups such as our group.
- Islander-based community groups in the relevant rural areas can play a key role in facilitating a seasonal worker program. This can begin with the planning phase, and extend to briefing, welcoming, inducting, and incorporating guest workers. The involvement of groups such as ours is important to ensure the well being of Islander guest workers and their families, and that they are able to adapt to their new cultural experiences in Australia - in this regards to this aspect it would also be worthwhile to consider directing opportunities to Islanders who already have family/relatives in Australia so they can gain support through family network groups in regional Australia.
- Cultural Support in the local community is also important as there is an existing shyness that often precludes the average Islander from approaching Palangis (European/ white people) for advice. They need understanding and people that they can trust to act on their behalf.

SUMMARY

Our group is very enthusiastic about the proposals for a program involving seasonal workers from the Pacific Islands. We would be very interested to participate further in any future planning and implementation processes.

Due to the short time-frame available, not all of our members have been able to participate in the preparation of this submission, but we believe that they would emphatically provide their support. This includes members from Samoa and Tokelau.

The following members are all citizens or permanent residents and have been involved in the preparation of and support this submission-

Iele Kalepo
President
(Tuvaluan & ex-Nauru,
ex-N.Z., ex-Kiribati, initial
participant in N.Z. Work Scheme)

Wailo Kalepo
(Tuvaluan & ex-Nauru,
ex-N.Z., ex-Kiribati)

Rabuna Tooma
(I-Kiribati & ex-Nauru)

Ric Fennessy
Secretary
(Ex-pat in Kiribati as
teacher including Agriculture)

Trevor Cumberland
(Expat in Solomon Islands
inc. Project leader for Rotary)

Zahi Cumberland
(Solomon Islander)

Jim Beaton
Treasurer
(Ex-pat in Tonga, proprietor
of leather goods manufacturing)

Keleane Beaton
(Tongan)

Niumai Uluitoga
(Fijian)

Dr. Sailasa Vueti
(Fijian)

Ema Vueti
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Tuwai Wells
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Ray Behn
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Sheryl Behn
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