



SUNRAYSIA CITRUS GROWERS INC
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SUBMISSION – Inquiry into the main economic and security challenges facing Papua New Guinea and the Island States of the Southwest Pacific

RE: Seasonal Horticultural Employment

Sunraysia Citrus Growers Inc (SCG) is an agri-political organisation, which represents citrus growers from the South Australian border to Boundary Bend in Victoria. SCG is funded by a voluntary, grower production-based subscription.

SCG considers that one of its roles is to represent the Sunraysia clients of the Murray Valley Citrus Board who we work with on a daily basis. The Murray Valley Citrus Board is a statutory authority under the Agriculture Industry Development Act (Vic).

SCG is sympathetic to the concept of providing opportunities for Guest Labour within the horticultural industries, specifically related to the Pacific Islands. Our organisation is very aware of the difficulties of attracting labour in peak harvest periods and we understand the need of growers to have a reliable and skilled labour force to ensure that fruit is handled correctly and in a timely manner for marketing opportunities.

The citrus season in the Sunraysia region is reasonably lengthy, commencing in May each year with early Navels and going through until March the following year as growers harvest Valencias. Harvest labour is required throughout this time. Many growers rely on backpackers to fill local harvest labour gaps, however the difficulty with backpackers is that they are keen to move on within a few weeks or months. Therefore growers are continually wearing the cost of training backpackers in the correct techniques of harvesting fruit, along with ensuring all new casual employees are inducted into the workplace in a proper manner.

A guest labour program, particularly if it had a time frame of up to 6 months, would be very conducive for citrus growers, particularly those with larger holdings, as they would have access to reliable and trained labour in the peak time of their harvest (June- Dec).

On a local basis, the citrus industry has witnessed the benefits of being able to employ people from across the Pacific, including Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands, developing friendships and loyal relationships. The general community has also benefited from the influence of a range of Pacific cultures which has brought enjoyment through song, food and community engagement.

SCG has one major concern with any Pacific Island Guest Labour program however. Growers should not have to carry out the work of the Department of Immigration. Growers do not need to be associated with any discrepancies that may occur in regard to the potential for illegal immigration. With the current challenges facing growers, such as drought and minimal water allocations, they are dealing with enough stress. One thing growers don't need is the stress of dealing with layers of bureaucracy and completing several different forms in triplicate to guarantee that their harvest labour program meets all the criteria. The program must be managed by the Department of Immigration in a way that ensures the best interests of both parties and ensures that the risk of illegal immigration is negligible.

In principle, SCG supports the current trial of a Pacific Island Guest Labour program and would welcome a further broadening of this scheme as long as it is managed appropriately and brings benefits to both parties.



Anne Mansell

Chair

Sunraysia Citrus Growers Inc

19th August 2008.