



DEDICATED Agriculture Visa AG VISA

Dedicated visa solution needed to address worker shortage

The Australian agriculture sector is an economic powerhouse with huge potential for expansion, but the rate at which the sector is able to grow and prosper depends largely on its ability to overcome serious, chronic labour shortages.

To provide a stable and sustainable workforce for agriculture that is fair and equitable for both workers and employers, the NFF supports the introduction of a Dedicated Agricultural Visa program.

The issue

While identifying precise figures on regionalised labour deficits and demand within Australia continues to prove challenging, the size and significance of the overall problem is well-documented. Studies have shown that more than 60% of growers in the horticulture (fruit and vegetable) sector experience difficulty recruiting and, as a consequence, have left produce unpicked to rot and waste. Similar difficulties in securing workers in the dairy sector has led to losses of up to \$364 million per year.

Numerous studies across different commodities, regions, and job types have highlighted the scale of the problem. For example:

- The NFF's 2018 National Farm Workforce Survey indicates that 80% of farmers experience serious difficulty finding workers.
- In 2010, the Australian Farm Institute estimated the labour shortfall by 2018 would be 102,438 full-time equivalent workers.
- The Victorian agrifood sector ranks labour shortage as the number one issue hampering its performance.
- University of Adelaide Professor Joanna Howe found that 60% of growers experience difficulty recruiting and, as a consequence, have left produce unpicked.
- Australian Dairy Farmers' reports that labour challenges cost the dairy sector up to \$364 million each year.

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Key points

The NFF is continuing its call for a comprehensive solution to the labour crisis on Australian farms – that is, a visa program which is:

- purpose built
- responsive to the needs of industry
- grants farmers access to existing labour pools
- minimizes the administrative and financial burden
- allow people who want to work on farms to come to Australia; and
- go to the work as and when they're needed.



Dedicated Agriculture Visa

- Recent reports on the impact of COVID-19 on farm labour indicates an additional shortfall of approximately 26,000 workers due to international and domestic border closures. Attempts to reopen pathways for foreign workers to safely enter into Australia have been hampered by the fragmented nature of the visa systems that are currently relied upon.

The consequence of this is that the supply of food and fibre products produced by Australian farms will be constricted and prices for everyday Australians will go up.

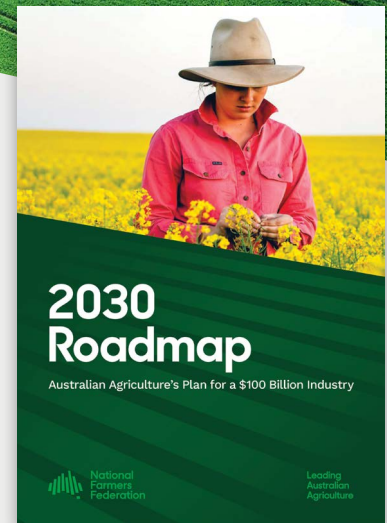
The solution

Our proposal for an agricultural visa is built around 6 core principles:

- 1. Flexibility and Portability.** Workers should be able to move from job to job (provided they remain working in agriculture) as and when they're needed. In addition to giving both worker and employer flexibility, this would minimise opportunities for abuses.
- 2. A Coordinating Body.** An industrial sponsor would be responsible for monitoring the workers' locations, employment, wellbeing, and providing them with assistance as needed, while maintaining contact with government and employers.
- 3. Fair Workplaces.** Perhaps most critically, workers could only be hired by farms that have demonstrated fair employment practices. To this end, the visa would feature an employer approval or accreditation system.
- 4. Appropriate Length.** The visa would have both a short term (up to 12 month) unskilled and a long term, semi-skilled stream, with a multiple entry component, the option for the worker to return to Australia, and ultimately the ability to transition into permanent residency.
- 5. The Right Numbers.** Currently both unskilled and skilled visa arrangements are effectively uncapped. However, in order to hire a migrant worker, employers must conduct 'labour market testing'. The dedicated agricultural visa would abandon this process, setting localised visa caps which are based on reliable data and set in consultation with the regions and industry.
- 6. Balanced Checks.** In addition to the coordinating body logging the worker's whereabouts etc., there should be additional mechanisms to ensure the entrant complies with visa restrictions while in Australia, and that he/she departs when the visa expires. The worker will be issued with ag-work entitlement cards, a portion of the workers' pay (e.g. the superannuation component) may be held on trust pending their departure, and workers who are compliant during their stay may have easier access to subsequent visas.

What can Governments do?

- Develop a visa scheme that incorporates the core principles outlined above
- Engage in meaningful consultation with key stakeholders to ensure that the visa scheme is fit-for-purpose and meets the needs of industry
- Implement the scheme in a methodical and strategic manner that does not disrupt the flow of foreign workers under existing visa schemes
- Commit to supporting the project (both financially and politically) to ensure it is successful in the long-term.



The NFF has a goal for agriculture to be a \$100 billion industry by 2030. The *2030 Roadmap* is a plan developed by the NFF to guide the sector to this goal.

Roadmap Aspiration 4.2

We have robust and sustainable mechanisms to access labour from Australia and across the world.

