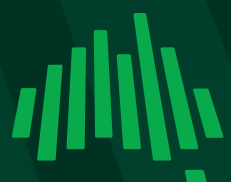


National
Farmers
Federation

Food Supply Chain Capacity Study

May 2024



The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is the voice of Australian farmers.

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

The NFF represents Australian agriculture on national and foreign policy issues including workplace relations, trade and natural resource management. Our members complement this work through the delivery of direct 'grass roots' member services as well as state-based policy and commodity-specific interests.

NFF Member Organisations



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Introduction

With agricultural production forecast to increase by 6% to \$85 billion in the coming financial year, the immediate future for Australia's agricultural industry is bright. Indeed, we believe that the value of the agricultural sector can exceed \$100 billion by the year 2030. While this goal is ambitious, we believe that, with the right settings, it is achievable.

Nonetheless, despite our positive outlook, it would be naive to suggest that farm are not facing significant obstacles. And chief amongst those obstacles are significant workforce challenges:

- a workplace relation system which, is a compliance minefield rather than a rationale arbiter of rights and duties.
- a VET system with structural problems which prevent it from delivering the skills which the industry need.
- a migration system which is a confusing and expensive political football and drives costs and frustration as much as productivity.

But perhaps the most troubling obstacle is the conventional wisdom which conceives of agriculture and farm work as “old fashioned” with limited career pathways, remuneration, or social status. While the reality is very different — with much ag' work highly skilled, well paid, and using cutting edge technologies — these perceptions contribute to the difficulties which the sector faces attracting and retaining workers. And while the issue of labour shortages in Australian agriculture is part of a wider, endemic issue, we believe that it is at least partly driven by a lack of knowledge and understanding of the agricultural sector and a consequential poor uptake of agricultural jobs and careers.

The Jobs and Skills Australia's (**JSA**) Food Supply Chain Capacity study (**the Study**) is an opportunity to challenge those perceptions and propose measures which will help the sector to address them.

That said, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that the Study is not the first to cover these issues in recent memory. Indeed, it follows a quantity of recent enquiries which looked at employment and labour generally¹, discrete aspects of labour², and farm work specifically³. Although each of those enquiries had its own context, it's unlikely that the changed context radically alters the conclusions which were reached. In our submissions to the Employment White Paper in September 2022 we made the following observations:

In the short term, the NFF supports an improvement to the migration settings, a simplification of the industrial relations system, and enabling broader participation in the workforce for all who are willing and able. Long term productivity growth will be promoted by successfully skilling Australians through the reform of the VET sector and helping agriculture to be embraced as a modern, professionalised workplace and employer of choice.

¹ e.g. *Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*

² e.g. *Review of the Migration System — Final Report 2023*

³ e.g. *National Agricultural Workforce Strategy — Learning to excel.*

Despite much tinkering (actual and threatened) in the intervening years, each of those observations remain *at least* as pertinent as when they were made. So, while we engage sincerely with this study, we hope that its consequence will be something more lasting than idle observations and chaff for the next round of enquiries. Rather than empty rhetoric, opportunities to drive preordained outcomes, or (super)impose external agendas on the industry, what we need is actual solutions which receive meaningful and ongoing support. In that spirit, we welcome the opportunity to come at these issues afresh.

Finally, for abundant caution we note that while the study will consider the entirety of the food supply chain, we limit the submissions which follow to that part which occurs within ‘the farm gate’. That is, primary production, and not processes which are further up (inputs) or down (transport and processing) the supply chain. However, this restraint is largely a factor of time and capacity, not indifference. The fact that we have not commented on something — before, at, or after the ‘farm gate’ — should not be inferred to mean that we do not have a view, that we support the status quo, or would welcome significant change.

There is enormous potential for growth in Australian agriculture in the years ahead, but to fully realize that potential these barriers to growth in the Australian agricultural workforce must be addressed.

1. A Shared Vision for the Workforce

General Comments

The NFF is not averse to the idea of a “vision of the ... workforce”: something aspirational, a set of goals for labour in the farm sector which encapsulates the ambitions of both farm-businesses and their workers, along with a blueprint for achieving those goals. It is an admirable and evocative thing in conception. As such, we would approach the task of “developing a “vision” with an open mind.

However, it is also an inherently abstract concept, and for that reason a difficult thing to effectively implement from the ‘top-down’. Indeed, we seriously doubt the prospects of a “vision” which is handed to farmers by government: which has not been developed organically from the “grass roots”. At the very least any ‘vision’ will need to position the farm at its centre. While it is desirable and admirable for other groups — community, union, government — to buy-in, any vision must principally be designed and cared-for by industry.

All of that notwithstanding, at a high level the “vision” for the agricultural (and supply chain) workforce won’t be very different to the vision which the rest of the economy entertains for its workforce i.e. productive employees who are safe, appropriately remunerated, and happy in their work. At a more granular level it will need to consider the unique nuances of the agricultural industry: the fact it is largely but not exclusively regional, the fact that a lot of the product is seasonal, the fact that business is susceptible to natural forces (weather, disease, welfare, etc), the fact that it sits at the head of many lines of production, the fact that it is one of the — if not the — most important industry to social and national wellbeing, the fact that it will attract public attention. We think these (and other) unique features are critical to any vision of/for farming (workforce or not) but are often forgotten or marginalised in the development of policy which impacts the sector.

Questions

1. *What objectives should be included in a shared vision for the food supply chain workforce? Why are these objectives important?*

We note that it is a key priority of the NFF 2030 Roadmap to build and maintain a flexible and skilled workforce in both the short and long term, to promote agriculture as an employer of choice, and to attract motivated and suitably qualified workers to get the produce harvested, the cows milked, and the sheep shorn. Without more, that is the vision of the workforce which the NFF has promoted for the last decade or more.

The aspirations described at page 3 of the Discussion Paper are also good signposts:

- A workforce which will enable the sector to “sustain regional Australia”, “strengthen the economy”, “maintain food security”, and “overcome challenges”.⁴

⁴ Discussion Paper, pg. 3

- A workforce which: “maintains our position as a producer of quality food; minimises disruptions to domestic food security; provides safe, secure and rewarding employment; has the skills to enable industry growth and greater diversification, value-adding and productivity”.⁵

However, it is notable that, while these points identify broader public concerns and the needs and interests of workers, they do not meaningfully consider the position of the individual businesses who will be employing these workers. This is a fatal omission. While the broader national and workers interests are both necessary and desirable matters, the role of business is an existential consideration. Without business there is no employment. The truth — which may be so obvious that it is easy to forget — is that a job exists only because a business has made the decision that it needs a service which the worker can provide. If there is no business, then there is no such need. Similarly, an unavoidable truth — irrespective of how distasteful it may be — is that most job creation is essentially a question of balancing cost vs return i.e. if the business determines that it will cost more to fill a role than that role will generate — long- or short-term— in revenue, then that role will not be filled and there is no job. While employment decisions and practices may be more nuanced, the essential truth remains and no amount of political veneer or social engineering can alter these essential facts. This ‘vision’ needs to hold them both front and centre. In short, the promotion of business viability — and the impact on viability of any workforce decisions — is a necessary factor in any vision. It must acknowledge the primacy of the businesses and the viability of those businesses within a commercial context. Indeed, its ultimately about business viability — the interests of the individual businesses and what they manage within this framework.

Another factor which the vision should include is “professionalism” of the farm workforce and workforce management. A professional worker is not an unskilled labourer — an “odd-body” performing menial tasks with little respect. They are trained and respected career technicians, proud of their role and contribution, and valued for the knowledge, expertise, and the quality of their work. Similarly, employers are not “old-hands” barking orders, but skilled people-managers who understand the social and regulatory framework in which they operate and have a solid grasp of management tenants which promote productive approaches, discourage wasteful practices, and maintain morale and discipline. Within this ‘vision’ farms should be professional workplaces where staff are proactively managed and developed, rights are calculated in accordance with the legal framework, and health & safety is proactive and systematic not just a case of common sense.

For completeness, we also encourage the ‘vision’ to embrace flexibility and resilience (although these are probably a feature of a professional workforce) and a greater embrace of diversity. We will deal with these concepts below in some more detail.

2. *Who should be responsible for ongoing monitoring and reporting on progress against these objectives?*

Query whether there is a formal role for monitoring of and reporting on the vision’s objectives. While a vision may guide decision making both on recruitment (at the micro

⁵ Page 8 of Discussion Paper.

level) and policy settings (at the macro level), we don't see it as something requiring performance indicators or a report card. And, it should go without saying that we certainly don't see it as something which should be enlivened in any sort of compliance or enforcement regime. However, in terms of informal monitoring the "progress"— and indeed, relevance— of the vision, we have expressed a strong view above that it needs to place business at its centre. That is not very different to saying that the vision must be *owned* by industry and something that it will aspire and even hold itself to. However, we have also said that we ultimately think the 'vision' should be organic i.e. emerge from the 'grass roots'. While it may serve as a 'guiding light', businesses need to see the vision as something which serves its interests and thus be a willing "adherent".

2. Data and Information

General Comments

There is a longstanding issue with the (in)adequacy of data on agricultural labour. Even very basic information, such as the size of the workforce, is not well evidenced or catalogued. Indeed, while the findings of the ABS and others are cited as unassailable fact, the truth is that their conclusions are rubbery at best. Findings on, for example, the number of workers in the sector can omit/exclude/ignore much of the “contract” and outsourced work performed in/for the sector: administrative and technological support services, fencing and milking contractors, mechanics and vets, etcetera. These are workers who are essential to farm operation — and many would have been directly employed in the business model which was typical last century — but are now outsourced and therefore not (necessarily) recorded as “farm workers” in official statistics. The surveys and censuses may also miss the on-hire, itinerant, and temporary-migrant workers who are exceptionally important to assist during peak labour needs such as summer harvest. Of course, one of the most essential sources of labour to the traditional farm business, the informal relationships such as friends and family, will probably be completely overlooked. And unfortunately, we need to acknowledge that at least in some commodities unregulated and/or undocumented workers are a feature; both, for example, cash-in-hand workers and migrants without legal work rights (or worse). We may not be comfortable with it, but that does not change the fact that their numbers should be counted in the assessment of the overall workforce and labour requirements of the sector.

And that’s just the simplest, “highest level” numbers. The reality is that the problem becomes much more complicated — and the answers much more elusive — when you get into more granular data, such as the number of workers at a particular time and/or in a particular region and/or in a particular (sub)commodity and/or in a particular role or level of the business. Or data which — while presumably recorded in some form — is not shared between agencies (or with the public) such as payments and entitlements, injury rates, compliance with work-related laws, and skills and VET outcomes, etcetera, etcetera. Or when information about more abstract or intangible concepts are sought such as, for example, information on labour shortages (as opposed to job advertisements), attraction and retention outcomes, hard and soft skill levels and needs, wellbeing, etcetera.

This is an ongoing impediment to the development of fit-for-purpose ag’ workforce policy. In 2010 the Australian Farm Institute, recommended that the government should:

‘develop an annual national labour and skills survey for the Australian agriculture sector to deliver contemporary and forward-looking data on labour and skill requirements of the agriculture sector, with a focus on the peaks and troughs throughout the seasonal production cycle.

The recommendation was not adopted, and as then Chair of the Future Farmers Network, Dan Korff, observed in 2017:

If [this recommendation was] implemented, a much clearer view of labour requirements in Australian agriculture would eventuate enabling regional and national plans to be developed for the training and development of the future workforce, whilst contributing to reducing the labour gap on-farm.

In 2019 the NFF made the following recommendations to the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee:

The NFF recommends that the government conduct a comprehensive, sophisticated, and regular (at least five-yearly) audit of employment in agriculture, identifying all of the jobs/roles in the sector and the qualifications and skillset which those roles need, together with information which may assist career choices in relation to each role. The audit should culminate in a "ag-jobs profile" which reports on the findings, while bearing in mind the NFF's call for a farm "job brand", and in particular job titles that are aspirational, can be clearly identified, and allow for promotion, and job descriptions that articulate the skill requirements, roles and responsibilities required to undertake the role.

The Committee at least accepted the need, and opined in the National Agricultural Workforce Strategy:

Fit-for-purpose workforce data are not a 'nice to have'; they are essential for policy, programs and strategy to successfully meet the labour needs of the AgriFood sector over time. Lack of comprehensive, coherent, accurate and timely data can be a constraint on the sector's ability to advocate for the investments needed in their workforce, which in turn is a key component of productivity and growth.'

And in our 2022 submission to the Employment White Paper we noted that:

It is imperative that the agricultural workforce is captured in accurate data on an ongoing basis to provide the industry and policymakers with the best opportunity to make informed decisions. This is central to the development of any meaningful strategy. Decisions about jobs and skills should not be based on assumptions or speculation and should not be made simply because the person demanding has the loudest voice or the best access. They should be based on the best available probative evidence, which has been considered by experts and subject to public scrutiny. To enable this to occur, at least in the agricultural sector, we need access to quality workforce data which is current, accurate, and (to the extent possible) comprehensive. In addition, rather than treating agriculture as a uniform mass — which gives a hyper-simplified and unrepresentative picture — it should consider the circumstances of distinct commodities and regions individually. If nothing else comes out of this report, government should enable sophisticated workforce and skills data collection and analysis.

And while the White Paper⁶ frequently observed the lack of data stymied the development and implementation of good policy⁷, we are still waiting for any meaningful momentum/movement in this space. The reality is that any policy which seeks to maximise employment, productivity and wages, must be properly informed and evidence based. The workforce requirements of agriculture are dynamic and require an agile

⁶ *Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*, September 2023.

⁷ Not least in its Roadmap, the 10th and last focus area is: "Promoting inclusive, dynamic workplaces by working with employers to foster workplace diversity, collaborating with businesses through the employment services system and improving the quality and transparency of data to measure workplace performance." Pg 179

response to everchanging needs. Indeed, it is arguable that the broad aspirations of this Study will be hamstrung by this problem.

In recognition of this problem, AgriFutures commissioned a ‘Mapping the Workforce of Australian Agriculture’ study which provides an overview of the current ‘data landscape’, including current sources of data, collection methods, and challenges. In March 2024, the final report was published with 15 recommendations. As an analysis of the problem and a way to stimulate discussion the report is very worthwhile, but the recommendations are not a solution. They are at best a roadmap to address the data issues rather than a solution in themselves. As we noted in the introduction, we are long past acknowledging and admiring the problem. What we need is positive (and consistent) action. It is our fervent hope that this Study will result — directly — in that action.

Questions

3. ***What are the critical food supply chain workforce data and information gaps? Why do you consider these gaps to be critical?***

While there are many existing collections of data, as noted above we believe most of them will have critical gaps or shortcomings which undermine their reliability. Even if the census data on the size of the ag’ workforce as a whole was accurate, it does not stay current to inform decision making moment-to-moment or allow for the sort of granular analysis which is necessary to enable meaningful decision making. As a starting point we need a complete and current profile of the agricultural workforce. That is, an up-to-date picture of who is doing the work, what work are they doing, where they are doing it, when they are doing it, and why (both in the sense of why the farm needs the work done and the remuneration and other benefits they receive). In addition— as a starting point — we need a complete audit of workforce shortages, including what roles could and are not being performed, and where.

The ‘Mapping the Workforce of Australian Agriculture’ report provides a more detailed breakdown. It includes the following description of workforce data which, while somewhat generic, is also comprehensive:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number of people employed and employment type e.g., full-time, part-time, casual, seasonal ▪ Industry of employment ▪ Location of employment ▪ Occupation ▪ Role descriptions and requirements ▪ Demographics e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, education level ▪ Income level ▪ Hours of work ▪ Employment conditions (e.g. flexibility, leave, management) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education, training and skill levels ▪ Job vacancies ▪ Visa statuses ▪ Employment awards ▪ Recruitment and retention rates ▪ Work, health and safety data e.g., fatalities, injuries, near misses, WHS breaches ▪ Social and well-being data and indicators e.g. life and workplace satisfaction, physical health, mental health ▪ Enablers and barriers to working in a sector. |
|--|---|

As an inventory of the concepts which are sought to provide an overview of the entire industry (noting perhaps that it omits reference to seasons or periods of work) we would endorse this list. In effect, we would be looking for each bullet-point to be answered in relation to for each worker in the sector.

Furthermore, the project noted that the top five workforce data issues raised during the study included: (1) data specificity; (2) attraction and retention data; (3) data availability; (4) data capability; and (5) definitions and questions. All but the second address the collection and quality of the data (i.e. rather than addressing specific aspects or questions about the workforce) and we would hope that any future survey and data collection initiatives resolve those ‘qualitative’ issues. In addition, we would add a requirement that the data be kept serviceably current.

Finally, we would also note as almost an adjunct consideration, that data sources need to “speak to each other” to the extent possible. That is, if data is collected about the labour needs/make-up of, e.g., a dairy farm in Southern NSW, the collection and type of data should be consistent with that which is collected regarding dairy (or even chicken, berry, or cattle) farms in Northern Tasmania.

4. *What are the appropriate roles for government, industry and other contributors in the collection, dissemination and analysis of food supply chain workforce data?*

The scope of the task requires the size and resourcing of the Federal government to be done correctly. Indeed, the government already has mechanisms to collect — and probably already does collect — much of this data through census, migration, tax, safety, workplace relations, VET and education record pathways. The role for industry bodies — and other interested bodies such as unions, RDCs, and community groups — is to dissect, analyse, and ‘sense check’ the data with their members, and to draw granular, isolated, or localised conclusions which are verified ‘at the coal face’.

5. *What new capabilities and resourcing would be required to support a strategic and systematic approach to food supply chain workforce data? How would these be best delivered?*

6. *Are there examples of good practice in the collection, dissemination and analysis of industry workforce data that this study should consider?*

While these questions are best answered by the collecting bodies — who, we suggest, would be the Federal government agencies — it seems probable that more would have to be done to ensure they are able to coordinate and share data to create the ‘whole picture’; i.e. to talk to each other. And obviously, if the expectation is that industry collect this data, then first and foremost we need funding, but note that it we are unlikely to be able to collect completely representative and reliable data without some other force driving responses e.g. tax compliance or workforce needs.

3. Demand and Supply Factors

General Comments

In many respects, the challenges faced by agriculture are those faced by rural Australia more generally. For example, poor accessibility and limited access to transport, information technology and telecommunications services, limitation on health and education facilities and services, wages and cost of living considerations, availability and quality of housing, and general concerns about lifestyle opportunities have all contributed to the migration of young people away from rural areas. However, as discussed in the introduction to these submissions, a unique obstacle to attracting and keeping workers relates to negative perceptions of farm employment. Low levels of industry involvement in education and training, poor promotion of agricultural pathways and the limited capacity of the current education and training system to deliver innovative training solutions (see below) reinforce these negative perceptions. Indeed, more than 30 years ago the McColl Report⁸ (1991) attributed the decline in enrolments in agriculture-related tertiary courses in Australia to negative perceptions towards agricultural careers held by the general public. More recent studies have also found that agriculture suffers from poor perceptions, based on a lack of understanding of what a career in agriculture entails.

Questions

7. *What are the key factors influencing demand and supply of labour and skills in the food supply chain?*

The agricultural sector is currently experiencing a general worker shortage across multiple commodities. Specifically, there are currently national shortages for the following ANZSCO classifications: apiarist, agricultural engineer, agricultural consultant, agricultural research scientist, agronomist, aquaculture or fisheries scientist, agricultural and agritech technician, animal husbandry technician, aquaculture or fisheries technician, irrigation designer, irrigation technician, senior piggery stockperson, sugar cane farm worker, livestock husbandry worker, and piggery farm attendant.

The factors influencing this demand are broad but include the need for specialised skills and experienced and qualified workers to handle agricultural technologies and equipment. Another factor greatly influencing demand is the need for workers to be willing and able to live in remote and regional communities, where there are often not enough local workers to fill job vacancies.

The supply of labour and skills is also greatly affected by the factors mentioned above. Due to a relatively limited formal education and training framework in agriculture, the supply of workers able to fill skilled and technical roles on farms is relatively small. In response, many farmers have turned to migration schemes to fill low to medium level skilled vacancies on farms.

⁸ Report of the Review of Agricultural and Related Education, 1991

The remoteness of many farm jobs has also greatly affected supply of workers, as many remote communities, where farms are located, are not large enough to fill job vacancies.

8. *To what extent are attraction and retention in the food supply chain workforce intertwined with broader issues around regional development?*

One major issue affecting attraction and retention of farm workers is the lack of housing and accommodation development in regional communities. Without adequate accommodation options, many actual and potential workers cannot viably sustain or consider a life in regional and remote communities.

9. *What impact will innovation and technology have on the size, composition, future skills needs and productivity of the workforce? What are the key barriers and enablers to innovation and technology adoption?*

As an ever-changing industry, agriculture is open to technological advancement to increase efficiency and productivity. That being said, at present much of the agricultural sector is heavily reliant on human labour and there is no indication this will change in the short to medium term future. In order to ensure production capacity is not lost whilst new technologies are being created, an ample workforce pool must be provided to farmers.

10. *Are there examples of good practices related to improving attraction and retention in the food supply chain that the study should consider?*

The NFF currently operates the AgCAREERSTART program, which is designed to attract new workers into the agricultural sector. The program takes a cohort of young people (ages 17 – 25) and places them into entry-level agricultural work over the course of a year. This program is designed to bring young people, who have no previous connection to the agricultural industry, and introduce them to the industry through work placement with the intention that they may choose to pursue a long-term career in agriculture. From internal NFF data, approximately 84% of participants either stay working in the agricultural industry or pursue further education in the industry after the program⁹.

⁹ AgCAREERSTART. 2024.

4. Participation and Progression

General Comments

The farming sector is nowhere near so monotone as the typical stereotype would suggest — farmer as middle-aged, Anglo-white male. While that demographic undoubtedly makes-up a significant part of the agricultural workforce, the sector features people with a range of different backgrounds and life experiences.

- At 1.6% (and rising), the participation of people with a disability is almost double that of the Australian average of 1%.
- While the statistics could be more nuanced¹⁰ female participation is roughly one-third of the agricultural workforce.
- The median age of a farmer is 57, almost 20 years older than the median age of the Australian worker generally.
- 1.8% of the sector’s workforce identify as indigenous.

Nonetheless, in order to thrive, the sector should do more to enable greater diversity and promote workforce participation and inclusion. The proportion of the labour force identifying as Indigenous is less (75%) than the national average of 2.4%. And while one-third (or more) of the workforce are female, that proportion lags other industries, and the nation’s gender distribution generally. And we could do more to leverage off the experience of older workers and share their knowledge across the workforce.

In recognition of these realities, one of the central aspirations of our *2030 Roadmap* is for “a career in Australian agriculture [to be] an accessible aspiration for all.”

Women comprise 41% of the agricultural workforce, 18% of management roles, and only 2.3% of CEO positions. WGEA	4.3 A career in Australian agriculture is an accessible aspiration for all.	4.3.1 Conduct an annual agricultural diversity ‘audit’ to benchmark our diversity and measure improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Better data to measure our progress	Achieve gender parity in the agricultural workforce, and double the number of women in management roles.
		4.3.2 Promote initiatives that facilitate inclusion of underrepresented communities in the agriculture industry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More diverse industry leadership• Access to a larger pool of workforce talent• A workforce that better represents the Australian community	
		4.3.3 Work with indigenous leaders to grow opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in agriculture, including within industry leadership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduced disadvantage in indigenous communities• Attract new labour and skills• Better representation of indigenous agriculture	

¹⁰ For example, there is a significant component of “unattributed” female participation.

In addition to expanding the agricultural labour market and/or bolstering the industry's social licence and community attitudes towards the sector, removing barriers to employment would encourage untapped views and understandings. People from diverse backgrounds bring a range of skills, qualifications, talents and experience to the industries and roles in which they work. Indeed, immigrant communities “have played a central role in the development of Australia's agricultural sector especially in horticulture, filling labour shortages, bringing new agricultural commodities and practices, innovation and knowledge transfer.”¹¹ Indeed, according to a Victorian government report, encouraging culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people¹² to work in agriculture will net benefits for both the employer, the regions, and those CALD communities.

BENEFITS OF ENCOURAGING MORE CALD WORKERS IN TO A CAREER IN AGRICULTURE

For CALD communities:

- Increased dignity, self-confidence, stability and mental health from secure employment and skills being valued
- Less reliance on government subsidies
- Improved settlement and integration into society.

For Agriculture:

- Strength of diversity – every 1% rise in gender and ethnic diversity results in a rise in sales revenue of between 3% and 9%⁸
- International experience to develop ties with markets beyond Australian borders⁹
- Contribution of new ideas and methods of operation to revitalise agriculture.

For Regions⁹:

- Maintaining populations and economies
- Foster innovation
- Diverse skills and expertise.

Within that context, the fact that diversity within the sector has remained relatively static over the past 10 years is disappointing and requires our ongoing attention. Social barriers exist for the participation of other groups, and if the sector is to address its ongoing labour shortages it needs to be more flexible in embracing these other underrepresented parts of the local workforce.

¹¹ Collins J, Krivokapic-Skoko B and Monani D, New Immigrants Improving Productivity in Australian Agriculture, Charles Sturt University.

¹² 2016 Agriculture Victoria (Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions), *Identifying opportunities and challenges for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities to address workforce gaps in Victoria's agriculture sector* — Final Report. October 2020

Questions

11. ***What are the key barriers and enablers of increased participation and career progression in the food supply chain, especially for equity groups?***

As noted above, the perceptions of farm work as inherently ‘blokey’ — Anglo, masculine, physical — is a significant barrier. While this perception is inaccurate, no doubt it influences (young and other) Australian’s career decisions. It may result in a lack of diversity in agricultural role-models and senior leaders represented in the sector. It may also feed into an assumption that farm work is “not for me” — or worse of bias, discrimination and harassment — discouraging members of diversity groups from pursuing careers in agriculture. And from the farm’s perspective, many employers lack the confidence and capability to employ people with disability and are unaware of the Australian Government support and programs available to help them. This creates a cycle which is difficult to break.

It may also be observed that the obstacles are informed (or exacerbated) by the more notable and distinctive characteristics of farm jobs such as remoteness, isolation, and seasonality. For example, it will be more difficult for government to operate special support and enabling programs for farm workers and employers, when they are not located in urban centres and/or where there is a sparse number of participants. Indeed, basic enablers which the residents of urban centres can take more-or-less for granted — such as access to courses which provide specialised training or child-care — are often luxuries or simply unrealistic in remote Australia. It follows that flexible thinking is necessary; thinking which considers the special characteristics of the industry and appropriate policy settings.

Nonetheless, the sector is aware of this problem, running diversity programs and promoting the roles of cultural subgroups. Indeed, as a problem which may, to an extent, be sourced to popular assumptions and media stereotypes, it is up to industry to push back. This is a role which industry is prepared to embrace. For example, Farmsafe Australia is currently finalising¹³ a communications guide which will feature a chapter devoted to encouraging (both general and industry) media to highlight different perspectives:

HOW CAN YOU DO THAT?

Choose imagery that represents the diversity within the agricultural sector, including men and women of different ages and ethnic backgrounds. Highlighting the inclusive nature of farming can help increase tolerance, dispel stereotypes and attract a wider range of workers.

It’s also important to point out that the female on the farm is not only ‘the farmer’s wife’. She is often a farmer herself, and very often overlooked as a partner in the farm workforce, even if her labour is unpaid.

Women as Farmers

Women are not ‘just the farmer’s wife’ (and they never have been). Women are an integral part of the workforce and need to be recognised in imagery.

Indigenous Agriculture

A significant portion of our northern workforce is Indigenous and yet representation in imagery is rare.

Cultural Diversity

Racial diversity is extremely important to show in Australian agriculture, especially in the horticulture industry. Australian farmers are not all white, 50+ males.

¹³ Available early July.

In terms of ‘enablers’, the question is difficult to answer generally as the response would need to be tailored to the group in question, the specific circumstances of the farm (region, commodity) and the roles we are trying to promote. That said, as a starting point we would note that some of the things we have posited as important features of a “vision” would be enablers e.g. workforce flexibility and professionalisation would all enable participation and progression of diversity groups. A professional management team would, for example, not be discouraged from hiring workers from diversity groups and understand how to enable participation and seek any assistance (if necessary) to accommodate special needs and sensitivities.

12. *Are there examples of good practices related to improving the participation and progression of priority cohorts in the food supply chain that the study should consider?*

Although others can speak with more authority on the programs, we are aware that Ability Agriculture¹⁴ seeks to promote the experience of people with disabilities working in agriculture and to promote understanding of their needs. Sunpork runs its Autism-and-Agriculture-Program which successfully employs autistic individuals in piggeries. The program, which sought to "recruit, employ and retain people on the autism spectrum in SunPork Farms piggeries", provides support and assistance to employee-participants, their managers and co-workers, and the workplace generally — from recruitment, through training and onboarding, and then with ongoing employment. The program has expanded the labour pool for SunPork and, probably more importantly, the opportunities for people on the autism spectrum.

There are a number of programs, which aim to develop diversity within the sector’s leadership roles.¹⁵ The NFF itself is working to counter the lack of gender diversity by driving a number of programs developing young female leaders within our industry, including the Diversity in Agriculture Leadership Program (**DiALP**).¹⁶ Beginning in 2018, the DiALP has two main components:

1. A 5-month leadership opportunity offered to 12 women annually where they undertake an intensive mentoring program with industry leaders.
2. An industry supported initiative that requires partner organisations to make a public pledge to improve gender outcomes within their organisations, and report on their progress annually.

The DiALP is designed for aspiring female industry leaders to build upon existing skills by offering new experiences and networks. In the program, participants are paired with an industry leading mentor and work on developing and achieving personal and professional goals. The NFF recently surveyed alumni of the program and of those that responded, 74% obtained board positions with 54% obtained after graduating from the program.

¹⁴ <https://abilityagriculture.com/>

¹⁵ See <https://rural-leaders.org.au/>; <https://wotl.com.au/>

¹⁶ See <https://nff.org.au/programs/diversity-in-agriculture-leadership/>

The partner organizations also commit to directly impact how women participate in the industry. They introduce policies to enable female participation such as flexible work arrangements, improved parental leave policies, and removing gender bias in application processes. Through their efforts, the partners have reached 38.7% average female leadership representation within the 35 organisations. While these results are limited to the DiALP, it does prove that accountability and goal setting can have a major impact. No doubt, program partners are setting an example for the entire industry.

The NFF also runs the Indigenous Agricultural Product Framework Project¹⁷ which seeks to confirm “overarching principles for Indigenous agricultural products and provide tangible recommendations on a sustainable business model and the future uptake of credential requirements.” Once established and in use, the Indigenous Agricultural Product Framework will provide ongoing prosperity to Indigenous peoples and business through demonstrating authenticity, proving world-leading practices, and protecting and verifying claims about Indigenous agricultural products.

Burlington Berries¹⁸ near Cressy in Tasmania are a striking success story of how of sustained and positive local engagement has led to local seasonal employment. Burlington Berries strives to employ a local labour force as much as possible during seasonal peaks. This has required a sustained educational and engagement piece with locals on the demands, timings and necessary commitments of seasonal work. Over a period of a few years and sustained engagement and local education and development locals are employed, on a seasonal basis, by Burlington Berries. This cohort of employees would not ordinarily be employed due to low literacy/numeracy, inter-generational unemployment and other social challenges.

Finally the Sustainable Gardner based in Canberra employs a workforce of 34 people and is rapidly growing. 10 employees of this number identify as having a disability. The founder, Warren Aitken, notices when clients ask him who on their team has a disability and he tells them that they are not employees with disability to him and the wider team – they are all employees. Not all disabilities are visible and the sustainable Gardner is an excellent example of how a business has flourished due to its inclusive nature and set-up, not in spite of it.

¹⁷ <https://nff.org.au/programs/indigenous-agricultural-product-framework-project/>

¹⁸ <https://www.burlingtonberries.com.au/>

5. Disruption and Resilience

General Comments

The industry is accustomed to dealing with natural (flood, drought, fire, pest) and man-made (geo-political instability, regulatory changes) forces which impede its ability to generate product and do business. Indeed, as an industry which sits at the nexus of natural events and human decisions, we are dealing with a constant state of flux. A catalogue of significant natural events in just the last five years would include: drought, bushfire, global pandemic, mouse plague, and economic shock. Recent international events, such as the imposition trade barriers and global economic instability, are also sources of great uncertainty for the agricultural sector and building resilient supply chains is critical to ensuring Australian economic and food security.

And whilst less dramatic than climate conditions and geopolitics, the additional costs arising from internal political machinations are an unnecessary burden on farmers just seeking to run their farms and trade their produce in a timely and cost-effective manner. For example, as an industry that exports more than 75% of farmgate output and a price taker, agriculture suffers immensely due to inefficient and globally exorbitant costs for logistic and freight services. This concern has become more pressing following disruptions which we and the nation experienced from 2020 to 2022 (and, indeed, ongoing) as a result of the global pandemic. The cost of container freight increased exponentially throughout 2021, as compared to pre-COVID prices, and continues to remain elevated largely due to the subversion of market forces. To put this vulnerability in context, according to a 2020 LEK Consulting benchmarking study, up to 50% of the final price of grain can go towards freight and logistics, and those Australian producers pay significantly more per kilometre of grain freighted than grain producers in competing countries. It costs the same to ship a container of grain from South Australia to Indonesia as from Canada to Indonesia. This is despite the fact that the Australian journey is some 10,000 km shorter: one-third the length of the journey from Canada. Indeed, there is no better summation of the issue than the Productivity Commission's finding that inefficiencies at Australia's major container ports directly cost the Australian economy an estimated \$605 million a year. Farmers and consumers ultimately bear the cost of international agricultural supply chain inefficiencies, which are perpetuated by the lack of competition in parts of the maritime logistics system. Additionally, inadequate workplace arrangements and prolonged disruptions lower port productivity, the effect and cost of which is heightened by the pre-existing efficiency strain on agricultural supply chains. In recent years, industrial action has led to significant disruptions at ports, including shipping lines bypassing ports due to industrial disruptions and go slows. Sustained industrial action has caused significant additional costs for freight users. In January of this year, industrial dispute between DP World and the MUA left produce stranded as ports were shutdown,¹⁹ and in 2020 industrial disputes forced farm machinery which was destined for the Port of Fremantle to be diverted to Melbourne, creating millions of dollars in additional costs to freight the machinery back to Fremantle

¹⁹ <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/lamb-chops-clothes-and-cars-held-up-in-damaging-ports-dispute-20231215-p5errc>

via land, and weeks of delay. Importers and exporters should not be at the mercy of negotiations between maritime workers and waterfront infrastructure owners.

All of that being said, disruption is our norm and resilience in the face of disruptive, and indeed destructive forces, is an intrinsic strength of farming and something on which the sector prides itself.

Questions

13. *How effectively are we meeting volatile workforce demand across the supply chain?*

As noted above, every experience has taught industry to be flexible and pivot between labour sources where necessary. That is not to say that we welcome disruption, or that nothing needs to be done to enhance our capacity to deal with it — or to minimise the toll it takes on industry at both a macro and personal level — but given the amount with which farmers have had to manage, they are clearly very effective managers of disruption.

14. *How do external factors (for example climate and market access), influence the employment trajectory of the food supply chain?*

While external factors will obviously influence both the demand for and supply of labour in a variety of ways, both push and pull, experience dictates that the actual impact of those large-scale external factors is actually not great. As noted above, despite disruptions including climate and trade, the employment needs of the sector have not fluctuated significantly. Obviously, market forces will impact decisions about production, but natural events have had little impact on our labour demand. This is probably because we sit at the top of the production chain.

15. *How do we become more resilient to shocks and disruptions? What is the role of education, training and different migration pathways?*

Diversification is the best way to ‘future proof’ anything, so enabling the sector to access a diverse range of labour sources would be the best way to ensure it is not crippled by shocks and disruptors in the future. It follows that while those pathways may be improved and evolve, there is a need to keep those pathways open and viable in any structural change to education, training, and migration settings.

16. *How can we better respond to retrenchment and job losses caused by flood, drought and other disruptions?*

While they can be devastatingly destructive, natural disasters such as flood, fire and drought will not result in permanent changes to the industry or workforce needs. Indeed, the management of the seasonal workforce is a constant pressure on farm businesses. And the size of that seasonal need — which depends on the size of the annual yield — is certainly affected by natural forces such as weather, climate, pests. We would not necessarily describe these as “disruptors”, as they are a part of the standard environment (in both senses) in which our members operate and a permanent feature of the farm business. A much more pressing and greater risk to farming is the loss of workers due to human decisions, including policy change based on social drivers or widespread panic over relatively niche issues.

6. Education and Training

General Comments

The agriculture sector in Australia is facing evolving opportunities driven by scientific and technical advancements, changing consumer preferences, and the need for sustainable business practices. While a net-positive, it can mean that farmers and workers lack the skills required to adapt to new technologies, sustainable farming, and changing market demands. It is crucial that the agricultural workforce is equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to meet these challenges effectively and maintain long-term competitiveness. Indeed, a skilled and adaptable workforce is more resilient and can better navigate the challenge. Upskilling the agricultural workforce will foster innovation and productivity. It enables the industry to adopt modern practices, technologies, and sustainable methods, ultimately leading to improved agricultural output. It also promotes a robust ag' labour market, as employers can readily identify capable and talented employees, empowering farms to make better use of those talents, and enabling skilled employees to prove their value and attract higher wages accordingly.

Unfortunately, a skilled workforce is not something the agricultural industry or policy makers have always prioritised, and so we have failed to develop the systems and tools necessary to deal with the unique barriers of delivering formal training to the ag' workforce. A multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach is necessary to meaningfully address and help minimise these barriers. The NFF's vision for the industry to exceed \$100 billion in farm gate output by 2030 needs improved access to education and training in the food supply chain. But the challenge of accessing education, skills and training in agriculture is not a something that can be viewed or solved in isolation. It is part of a wider challenge, and requires a wider, holistic approach.

Questions

17. *How do full qualifications, short courses, on-the-job training, and extension activities contribute to the development of a (skilled food supply chain) workforce?*

When measured against other sectors, there is a comparatively clear bias towards lower levels of formal education in agriculture. Roughly 55% of the workforce have achieved no higher than high school level qualifications. And just 17% of the workforce have a degree level qualification as compared to 30% across all industries. Even with the “higher skilled” level positions, the agricultural workforce lags behind the nation. While farm managers, as compared to other agricultural workers, were most likely to have completed longer-term formal training and qualifications, only 13% are degree qualified, compared to 32% of Australian managers overall. And approximately 60% of farm owners/operators do not possess any post compulsory school qualifications, roughly 15% possess a Certificate III or IV qualification, around 8% possess a diploma or bachelor's degree, and just 2% of “farmers” hold postgraduate qualifications.

To some extent, this lack of formal education and qualifications is explained by the agricultural sector's preference for practical experience — sometimes described as a

“general disdain for qualifications”²⁰ — and the fact that in perhaps more than any other industry, farming is an ‘inherited’ career with the traditional family business structures dominating the sector. Many farmers and farm workers are introduced to the work at a very young age consequently finding less utility in formal qualifications, both in terms of obtaining employment and the actual performance of their duties. Most farm workers acquire their skills through practice and on-site learning, with short courses supplementing their skillsets. Some commentators have also suggested that farmers are historically resistant to promoting formal training and qualifications amongst the workforce because it could mean paying higher wages. The low share of workers with higher levels of educational attainment may also reflect the long history of agricultural extension activities being the vehicle to share information and improve farm management and practices. The prevalence of ‘word of mouth’ work opportunities and on-the-job training are also likely to have contributed.

This “general disdain” has led — or followed — government policy which has not served agriculture well. Traditionally, vocational training was provided to the farming sector through agricultural colleges which delivered three-year diploma programs covering a combination of practical, technical and management training. However:

*The Dawkins Review of higher education in 1987 effectively forced these colleges into the university sector. Most were taken up in university partnerships and the applied management programs were discontinued in favour of more academically based degrees. Most universities offering agriculture now run three-year Bachelor of Agriculture-type degrees, but they lack the applied nature and practical grounding of the college offering.*²¹

The number of dedicated agriculture colleges continues to decline, most recently with Queensland Agriculture Training Colleges ceasing operations on 6 December 2019. VET training is now principally offered by the state TAFE agencies and private RTO providers. These entities operate on a commercial basis and profit-driven outcomes drive decisions on delivery and offering of VET courses. This focus disadvantages ag’ training, which is expensive to deliver given it is located remotely, requires access to extensive land mass, expensive equipment and animals (which have to be maintained), and tends to be more popular in regional/remote/rural communities, which have low population densities, rather than urban centres. The problem is compounded by a lack of suitably qualified trainers and assessors for ag’. Acquiring and maintaining training credentials is costly and time consuming and fails to offer commensurate financial reward. This means that there are not enough trainers to offer qualifications in the ag-VET space. Indeed, the current education and training model pushes some of the teaching responsibility on to the individual students. Remarkably, it can be up to the students to contact TAFE’s and to ask for practical examinations.

This lack of availability of farm VET course is self-perpetuating: farms wean-off RTOs and deliver training in-house, leading to smaller markets for RTOs and therefore less coverage, which creates a destructive cycle. Low enrolments have led to terminating agricultural

²⁰ Jim Pratley and Cameron Archer, *Evolution of Agricultural Education in Australia*, 2017

²¹ Michael Williams, *Agricultural Extension and Training*, 5 July 2020, p 23

training programs on the basis that they are unpopular or obsolete, rather than because the RTOs are more focused on delivering other programs and assess value in terms of commencement/graduate numbers and not in terms of what those graduates deliver to the national economy. The results are stark. For example, while the largest cohorts of rural industry workers perform at or around the Certificate II or III level — and it follows that these are the areas with the greatest training and skills needs. However, a mere 62 RTOs are approved to deliver a Cert' II in Agriculture and just 52 when it comes to the Cert' III.²²

At least to some extent, 'out-of-the-box' ideas have attempted to address this shortcoming. AgSkilled is an example: a bespoke program which delivers the short courses that industry needs. It was established in 2017 in partnership between Cotton Australia, GRDC, and the NSW Government to develop an education and training system which 'joins the dots' between the farm industry, VET and workers. It provides training that targets identified skills gaps in plant production and, livestock industries, and offers fee-free part-qualifications for short courses (i.e. micro credentials) in the areas which industry needs, rather than those which are most profitable for RTOs to deliver. It has a dedicated, industry-based program manager that co-ordinates the program (approval of participants and engagement with RTOs) and a 'tri-partite' steering committee which determines course offerings. Participants must have the support of a current or future employer in agriculture; i.e. existing farm staff or professionals rather than (like most funding) the unemployed and/or disadvantaged. All units completed through AgSkilled are accredited and can be recognised as prior learning, so that the model complements other training pathways. Courses are offered in diverse areas: precision agriculture, emerging technologies, business management, farm machinery operation and maintenance, and soils and nutrition. AgSkilled, which has a completion rate of over 85%, responds to the needs of industry, and funding is tailored to demonstrated requirements and can be adjusted to suit students with a range of skills and experience. It is offered in areas as diverse as precision agriculture, emerging technologies, business management, farm machinery operation and maintenance, and soils and nutrition. The National Agricultural Strategy spoke to the success of the program, and in response recommended that the government: "Establish multiparty ag' labour advisory committees to lead development of demand-driven capability programs across the sector."²³

Another part of the solution may be for the sector to (re)consider trade level apprenticeships. While the concept has never been widely embraced by the sector²⁴, a lack of recognition of farm skill sets as a professional/trade equivalent "brand" means that those skill sets are viewed as a less meaningful career option and have restricted access to subsidies and funding. It has also placed agriculture at a significant disadvantage in appealing to young people interested in studying for a career -- with portable skills -- rather than just a job and a pay cheque.

²² According to training.gov.au:

<https://training.gov.au/Search?SearchType=Rto&searchTgaSubmit=Submit&scopeNationalCode=AHC30122&includeImplicitScope=true®istrationStatus=0%2C1%2C2%2C3>

²³ NAWS Recommendation 17.

²⁴ Although it did find some favor in, for example, Tasmania in the 80s

Fortunately, this historical attitude has been tempered in recent years. Indeed, the NFF 2030 Roadmap identifies ‘establish[ing] a nationally consistent ‘trade-equivalent’ job brand for skilled farm workers’ as one of the key actions. Although ‘traineeships’ are available in ag, they are shorter and less intensive/comprehensive, are not seen as feeding the graduate into a career, draw less funding and support to both trainees and employers and are generally a less attractive ‘half-measure’. Trade apprenticeships may also be seen as beneficial to farm employers. Unlike traineeships, which last for just one production season, an apprenticeship lasts three years. In addition to providing some workforce certainty and more robust (and relevant) skills sets, the three years will provide the business with greater ‘return on investment’²⁵ Another benefit of an apprenticeship is that it can be a conduit for new ideas and technologies to pre-existing organizations and farms. The rapid and ever-changing landscape and technology used in modern agriculture necessitate regular upskilling and practice revision. Apprentices can be that conduit between farmers and new ideas, practices, and tools, exposing their employers and the wider farm teams about their learnings. This would be an excellent way of rapidly disseminating new practices and cutting-edge technologies. It may necessitate a new way of thinking about apprenticeships, however it will benefit both the apprentice and the employer. Both will learn new information if they are willing.

At its core, apprenticeship is a relationship-driven model, based on actual day-to-day work, in which a novice gains hands-on knowledge from an expert to grow skills and act with increasing independence. In the classic one-on-one model of apprenticeship, the learning happens as a result of physical proximity and observation²⁶

A recent feasibility report by Skills Insight into an Agricultural Apprenticeship shows there is an appetite for the development of a formalized Apprenticeship Program. With the correct mindset and support for the employers now is a once in a generation opportunity to re-shape how apprenticeship and learning on farms is executed. A futureproof and regularly upskilled workforce is necessary for the future of Australian food supply chain capacity.

18. What are the education and training barriers faced by students, employers and providers, including in Regional Australia?

The challenges and barriers to training faced by students, employers and providers, particularly in regional Australia have been debated and discussed extensively. The geographical distance and distribution is vast and varied: geographical isolation, reduced access to resource, connectivity, flexibility, lack of homegrown perspective and workforce/talent and ‘thin’ markets.²⁷ Ag’ students tend to be stationed in regional and remote areas which are not, by and large, within an easy drive of many VET institutions. This means more resources are necessary to ensure these students placements. Two recent publications have examined these challenges and proposed potential considerations and opportunities for improvement.

²⁵ Michael Williams, *Agricultural Extension and Training*, 5 July 2020, p 26

²⁶ McKinsey pg. 2

²⁷ National Farmer’s Federation, Submission to the National Agricultural workforce Strategy, August 2020

The Australian Universities Accord final Report,²⁸ released on 25th February by the Minister for Education has set ‘ambitious targets’ in the form of 47 recommendations. Those recommendations include:

- Increasing the tertiary education attainment rate from the current 65% to at least 80% of Australians in the workforce by 2050; and
- Increasing the percentage of university educated Australians aged 25 – 34 from 45% to 55% by 2050.

One of the Accord’s main drivers is to achieve ‘participation parity’ by 2050. This means that more people from disadvantaged background -- including students from regional Australia -- attend university. The funding changes will also drive participation parity as regional universities tend to have a higher percentage of students from under-represented backgrounds.

The Regional Education Commissioner’s Annual Report 2023²⁹ has 21 issues for consideration. The chapter relevant to the VET sector can support, if implemented, the Universities Accord Final Report, which includes:

- *Issues for Consideration 9* – recognition that VET and Higher Education offer parallel pathways to success, support informed student choice and aspiration by resourcing schools to provide properly targeted, informed and expert careers advice.
- *Issue for Consideration 13* – Enhance and expand the regional Study Hubs program by exploring opportunities to collaborate with state and territory governments.

The challenges and barriers to regional Australians are diverse, even from region to region however the proposed supports and changes detailed above would see greater co-operation between industry, local government and all the tertiary institutions involved. A coordinated and intentioned effort will lead to participation parity and the opportunity for young people of the regions to stay studying, working and ultimately living in their regions. This will help stem the brain drain to urban areas.

19. How effectively is the education and training system responding to changes in technology, business structures and other developments? What is the impact of Australia’s research and development workforce?

Anecdotally, the technological components of the Cert III in Agriculture are not sufficiently up to date or taught as well as they should be. The fast-moving and ever evolving nature of agricultural technology necessitates a more responsive and reactive way of teaching partners and agile sources of this type of content. Further use and uptake of extension activities could help strengthen the sector.

²⁸ The Australian Universities Accord final Report, released 25th Feb 2024 by Hon Jason Clare, Minister for Education

²⁹ Regional Education Commissioner, Annual Report, 2023 and Cultivating Futures Report, Ag Force, Queensland 2023

Historically only certified education and training was perceived as of value.³⁰ Industry³¹ and the bigger universities have access to the most up-to-date technologies. Using these resources, via industry, could be a way to quickly and efficiently access technology and in turn influence change in a timely manner. Industry is a valuable resource that could be used to fast-track ag' students' technological strengths and hands on experiences. Collaboration is key in embracing partnerships with industry. The private sector is a critical player in growing and investing in the regions³² closer integration with industry is a necessary pathway for upskilling students and ensuring that both industry and employers are active in the discussions of what skills are needed³³ If TAFE could build and leverage these relationships and resources the students will benefit. There is an opportunity for deeper engagement between industry and the education and training systems in (regional) Australia. The educational power of Industry should be harnessed and shared. Industry is at the cutting edge of new technology and practices. Their research & development and marketing & sales teams are a highly educated and mobile resource that can be readily accessed and engaged.

20. *Are there examples that this study should consider of good practice that has improved access to and/or relevance of education and training in the food supply chain, or in regional Australia more broadly?*

Ireland has recently launched a Farm Manager Apprenticeship and a Farm Technician Apprenticeship.³⁴ These newly recognised and approved methods and modes of learning will be interesting to follow and study. The completion and retention rates of ag' certificates and traineeships here in Australia are low.³⁵ Using a working model, like Ireland, is attractive for Australia when looking for a study of good practice into the continuing education of food supply chain workers. Europe, more broadly, has a wide range of supports to continue education and training for all Agriculturalists in the EU. The geographical proximity and overarching effect of direct effect and direct applicability ensure a broadly trained and mostly supported workforce.³⁶

³⁰ Agricultural Extension and Training. A briefing for the NFF, 5th July 2020 by Michael Williams

³¹ The future of Agriculture Training Review, Victoria State Government, Education & Training, 2022, pg. 15

³² Australia's Regions: Investing in their Future. The Recommendations of the Strategic Regional Growth Expert Panel for Investing in the Future of Regional Australia, 2019, pg. 40

³³ Changing the Design of TAFE for a New Normal. How digital is Transforming the Training Experience, Campus Design and TAFE Operating Models, 2019, pg. 12

³⁴ <https://www.teagasc.ie/education/apprenticeships/> and <https://youtu.be/ZizYjQqW3y8>

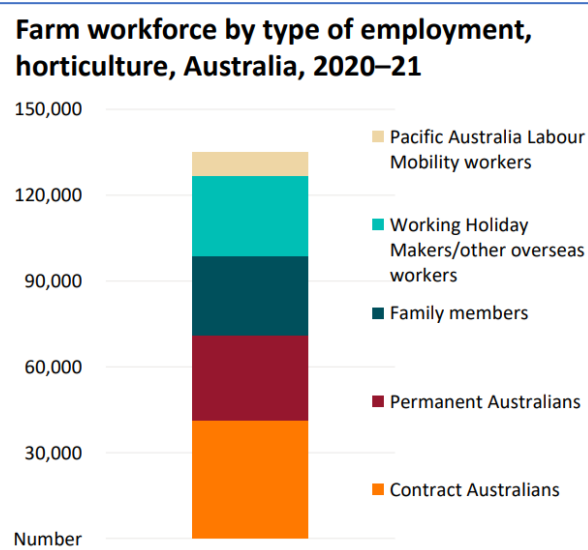
³⁵ NCVER – average 47.5% of Certificate III are completed, VET qualification completion rates increase, media release, 30 August 2023

³⁶ Agricultural education and lifelong training in the EU, EU Parliament Briefing, Oct 2017

7. Migration

General Comments

The promotion of ag' careers and removal of barriers for the domestic workforce are two of our greatest workforce priorities. Nonetheless, migration is and will remain an important part of the workforce 'puzzle'. While the migration system is (understandably) designed to ensure that permanent Australian residents are prioritised in the labour market, that doesn't mean that the system should be restricted to merely providing short term crisis relief. There are many roles, especially in the ag' sector which are vital to the Australian economy but, we must accept, will not attract enough Australians in the short, medium or long term. Most farm jobs are not vacant because of a lack of foresight in planning, but because of chronic disinterest in the work and/or because it is not located in population centres. In those cases, it follows that — subject to reasonable checks and balances — the system should not discourage use or be significantly more costly or challenging than hiring locally. The system has failed where it is cost prohibitive, complex and slow, and/or does not enable enough workers to enter the country to cover endemic and irreversible shortages such as those which are frequently experienced in the ag' sector.



Three migration programs feature heavily in the ag' workforce: backpackers, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, and temporary skills shortage visas.

Backpackers

Lower skilled migrant labour is drawn chiefly from the ranks of backpackers; that is, travellers on the “work and holiday maker” (subclass 462) and the “working holiday maker” (subclass 417) visas. While notionally on a ‘visitor’ (that is vacation) visa, backpackers have general work rights. They are a young, mobile workforce, who are often looking for short term employment as they travel the country. And while many will gladly spend time working on farms, a significant proportion of the backpacker workforce take farm jobs to satisfy a requirement to work 88 days to qualify for a 2nd (year) visa and 6 months to qualify for a 3rd.

It cannot be overstated just how important backpackers are to farms. Without them, we fear, the sector would grind to a halt. Respondents to a recent NFF survey indicated that, across all commodities, backpackers make up a little over one-third of the farm workforce during peak labor demand. That proportion was consistent for grains, swelled to almost one-half for horticulture, and in the red meat sector was roughly one-quarter. For that reason, farmers are **very** concerned about suggestions that the government may abandon the ‘specified work’ incentive. Indeed, we are aware of the views that “specified work” may make backpackers vulnerable to exploitation — and while we can acknowledge that, as with many industries, some segments of agriculture have a problem — we do not accept

that the size or nature of the problem today has been adequately particularized, that it has been linked to the specified work component, or indeed that any case made that abolishing specified work would resolve that problem. Nor has anyone suggested a realistic labour alternative for the sector. The present government seems to be under the misapprehension that the PALM scheme (see below) is the answer to all of industry's labour woes. We will address PALM in more detail below, but for present purposes it is sufficient to say that, while PALM is a very good program within its own parameters, it has its own issues and is by no means a panacea.

Without more, farms need backpackers and will continue to need backpackers into the foreseeable future. To abolish the “88 days” in those circumstances would be to kneecap an industry — with consequential impacts such as skyrocketing grocery prices, crippling the terms of trade, and establishing serious challenges to food security — without a solid probative reason.

Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme

On balance, the PALM program has been a success and has grown year-on-year. It provides growers with access to a regular (if not constant) source of labour for extended periods and, as such, allows for workforce continuity. Horticultural farms surveyed who used the PALM engaged around 15 of these workers per farm, but the number ranged from 2 to over 50. They are generally viewed as reliable and committed, and an independent study estimate that their productivity levels are significantly greater — up to 20% — than those of backpackers. Growers also report that they have greater control over their labour supply.

However, only about 420 employers are approved to actually use the program, and most run labor hire operations. Participation in the program requires a significant upfront commitment from employers. In addition to the usual employee entitlements, a farmer who wishes to participate must negotiate a complex bureaucratic approval process, arrange and make upfront payment for the workers' flights, transport and airfare, ensure suitable accommodation, guarantee the worker at least 30 hours work per week, provide access to a dedicated “welfare officer”, comply with government's reporting requirements, and of course obtain approval before making any changes to their dealing with the PALM workers. The ‘approved employer’ is also responsible for the workers' “pastoral” care, which can mean anything from ensuring the workers have access to sport and leisure activity and religious services, to caring for workers - for example, checking whether they have adequate clothing or (unbeknownst to the grower) are pregnant or suffering from chronic illnesses³⁷. The cost and requirements have only increased in recent years. While the government recently retreated from a requirement for employers to guarantee at least 30 hours week-on-week — as opposed to the slightly more flexible requirement to guarantee 120 hours every 4 weeks — a number of other changes have added to the costs and administrative burden for employers. The scheme requires an arbitrary ratio of wellbeing and welfare support persons to workers with no flexibility in delivery methods. It also creates a range of additional reporting processes that are duplicative of existing requirements under Australian law, including dispute resolution processes and reporting of WH&S incidents. Indeed, employers must also engage with an army of different government agencies and

³⁷ Even though the program is designed to ‘filter out’ these workers.

representatives, many of whom have specific interests or concerns. Managing responsibilities under the scheme requires many approved employers to hire dedicated personnel, which makes it essentially inaccessible to smaller growers. Indeed, according to ABARES the actual non-wage cost to farms per worker is about \$1,634, with a much greater “upfront cost” of an estimated \$3,000. This is significantly more than the \$134 a backpacker (or Australian) worker would cost. The upfront investment can make it difficult for farmers to derive a sufficient return to make the investment worthwhile. In addition, the sporadic and unpredictable labour needs of farmers mean any delays in the application process can frustrate their ability to rely on the program. It also means that farmers are frequently unable to guarantee adequate hours of work.

Another concern in relation to the seasonal worker program is that the pool of workers is relatively small and sending nations are already concerned about 'brain drain',³⁸ especially when taking into account the fact that New Zealand’s “Recognized Seasonal Employer” scheme already draws very heavily on the same labour pool and other foreign nations, including Canada have a similar program. It follows that there is a risk that the use of the program will be limited to avoid stunting the growth of the home nations’ economies. This warning is particularly ominous given that the program is designed to assist these nations. Before accepting the PALM as the panacea to the industry labour needs, it will be important to understand the maximum labour sending potential of home nations.

Skilled Shortage Visas

The various “skills shortage” visas allow workers with a specific skill set to migrate to Australia and work for an approved business for a number of years (depending on the role, worker’s skills, the commodity, etc). These workers fill labour shortages, contribute knowledge gained in other countries to the growth and development of Australian agriculture, and provide valuable training for local Australian workers. The pathway offers a level of certainty to farmers faced with chronic labour shortages.

However, the industry has long been vocal about the problems with the program. It is, for example, limited to a relatively small number of standardized occupations. Many skilled agricultural occupations are not eligible as they have limited formal qualifications, and/or are new and emerging, and/or are not recognized by the ANZSCO classification codes,³⁹ and/or because their need is not documented with the rigor (or at the volumes) which the bureaucracy has traditionally required. Some sectors have addressed this directly with the government, having negotiated template ‘labour agreements’ in the pork, dairy, horticulture, fishing and meat-processing sectors which have been in use since about 2011. These agreements are critical. They tailor the migration system to provide the right pathways for their respective industries and remain extremely important going forward.

There are significant costs associated with the skilled visa programs. In addition to the normal visa fees, there will likely be costs associated with engaging agents and experts, and the ongoing requirement to contribute to the so-called “Skilling Australia Fund” (SAF).

³⁸ <https://devpolicy.org/brain-drain-1-a-growing-concern-20221013/>

³⁹ Although recently skills lists have revised to include more occupations and the Government has been admirably flexible.

The latter is a particular bone of contention given that the SAF payment goes straight into consolidated revenue, rather than being used to actually address the skill shortages of the industry (which has created the reliance on the migration system). However, perhaps most fundamentally, the migration system can be slow to process applications. Although it would be unreasonable to cite this as a typical or endemic problem, there are nonetheless numerous cases of visas taking many months, even years, to reach a decision. While the funding decision of the Albanese government have accelerated visa processing and resolved a lot of those issues for the time being — and should be acknowledged as such — that does not resolve the risk that (as priorities and funding arrangement change) we may again face cases of lengthy delay. And while, admittedly, some delays may be sourced to the applicant -- e.g. failing to provide a complete or 'decision ready' application -- this too must be recognized as at least partially a problem with the system. When the people it is designed to serve cannot successfully negotiate its nuances, the system is undeniably broken.

Australian Agricultural Visa

Finally, while the Albanese Government axed the development of a dedicated agriculture visa to prioritise the PALM scheme, the NFF remains steadfast in the necessity of expanded migration settings to supplement the domestic workforce in agriculture. The conditions that initiated the calls for a dedicated Australian Agricultural Visa (**AAV**) still exist. The AAV was announced in the context of the UK-AUS free-trade agreement, which removed the requirement for UK backpackers to work 88 days on-farm to renew their visa. Almost 75% of the respondents to the NFF's recent labour survey characterised the consequences of this change (alone) as significant to catastrophic. This will result in a 20% to 25% reduction in the available seasonal workforce. A comprehensive solution which is purpose built and responsive to the needs of industry is sorely required. Such an arrangement would not displace the need for *nor* utilisation of PALM, as both migration streams would provide solutions to different types of labour demand from industry. A dedicated AAV would grant farmers access to existing international labour pools, while minimising or expediting the administrative and financial burdens. It would allow travellers who want to work on farms to come to Australia and go to the work as and when they're needed and would feature strong safeguards to ensure workers are not exposed to mistreatment and exploitation. It would allow access for smaller growers who are currently finding engaging with the PALM scheme either too expensive up front or too difficult when dealing with the complex administrative challenges required.

Questions

- 21. *How effectively do current migration settings address shortages in the food supply chain, support regional development, complement the jobs, career progression, wages and conditions of all workers, and prevent migrant worker exploitation? What types of shortages are these different migration settings trying to address?***

We cover these questions in our opening comments above. In summary, the agriculture sector access workers through a suite of migration programs, each of which address different workforce needs. The 'skilled visa' system provides longer term workers in more technical roles. PALM workers provide short-term seasonal workers, almost exclusively for the horticulture and meat processing sectors. And the Working Holiday Maker program provides workers in both short-term unskilled and longer-term semi-skilled roles across

the entire sector. None of these programs is perfect, but without them or with any significant, detrimental change, the sector would not be able to function.

The risk or vulnerability of migrant workers to “exploitation” is frequently cited as a counterpoint to this need/reliance. This is not a claim we vigorously contest, and for that reason we have supported a number of initiatives aimed at providing greater protection and assurance.⁴⁰ Indeed, we would be open to other measures. For example, employer registration and greater information and outreach to migrant workers; both of these steps were recommended by the National Agricultural Workforce’ Strategy and received our (in principle) support. However, it is worth noting that the word “exploitation” is vague and used to describe a range of conduct — cash-in-hand, under-payments, living conditions, health and safety violation, bullying and harassment, bonded labour, modern slavery, and worse. For that reason, we are not clear on the scope or nature of the problem or the best measures to address it. We need, as a starting point, reliable data — which the NFF strongly supports — which clearly defines and ensures that different problems are not “lumped together” in a way which does not provide meaningful intelligence or help identify solutions which are specific to the ag’ workforce. In the absence of that evidence, it is difficult to say with any confidence how/if existing setting address “conditions of all workers, and prevent migrant worker exploitation”.

22. *Thinking about the part(s) of the food supply chain in which you are involved, what problem is migration seeking to address? Is migration an appropriate solution? Is there a need for different migration solutions for seasonal workforce needs?*

Again, refer to our opening statement. In short, workers are often hard to source domestically due to factors such as, i.e. remoteness, domestic attitudes towards low skilled work. Migration has served as the solution to part of this problem.

23. *To what extent do the Working Holiday Maker program and regional migration complement other sources of labour supply in food supply chain industries (e.g. the domestic workforce, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme)?*

See opening comments. The skill migration, WHM and PALM scheme are all essential and complementary parts of the on-farm labour supply chain in Australia. While there is some overlap, ultimately, they service different needs.

We note that the NFF and other industry groups were attempting to develop a bespoke alternative under the previous government, the AAV. Unfortunately, those efforts were terminated by the current government and with no apparent appetite to resume them the current WHM framework, including the 88-day incentive, must be maintained.

⁴⁰ E.g. modern slavery and migrant worker protection legislation, national labor hire licensing, stronger action by the fair work ombudsman and border force.

24. *To what extent are specified work requirements essential to attracting Working Holiday Makers into work in food supply chain roles in regional Australia?*

See opening above. The specified work incentive of 88-days of on-farm work is absolutely essential to the food supply chain. Without this requirement, WHMs would likely not venture much out of the urban centres (i.e. Sydney and Melbourne). And without any serious alternative, farmers would be losing between 25-50% of their on-farm labour force⁴¹.

25. *Are there examples of good practice where regional migration has been effectively integrated with planning by governments and industry, infrastructure investment and economic opportunities that this study should consider?*

The Karen refugee community's successful settlement in Nhill, Victoria, offers a model of effective regional migration integration involving coordinated planning by government, industry, and community groups. This initiative was driven by the collaboration between the poultry processing company Luv-a-Duck, the local community, and the Wimmera Development Association. Facing labour shortages, Luv-a-Duck sought workers and partnered with the Karen community, who were seeking stable employment and a supportive environment. This collaboration involved comprehensive planning and support. The Karen were provided with employment opportunities at Luv-a-Duck, which addressed both the labour needs of the company and the economic integration of the refugees. The local community played a crucial role, welcoming the Karen families and helping them with housing, education, and social integration. Government support, including infrastructure investment and settlement services, further facilitated the process. This integrated approach not only filled local job vacancies but also revitalized the rural town by increasing population and fostering cultural diversity.

This case exemplifies how regional migration can be successfully managed through a synergistic approach involving various stakeholders. By aligning the interests of businesses, local communities, and government agencies, the integration of migrants can lead to mutual benefits, including economic growth and enhanced social cohesion. The Nhill experience highlights the importance of strategic planning, community involvement, and targeted support in creating sustainable migration outcomes.

⁴¹ National Farmers' Federation. *Quick Farm Labour Survey*. 2024.

8. Biosecurity Skills and Workers

General Comments

Australia's biosecurity system is fundamental to the success of our agriculture industries, to the health of our natural environment and to our society and economy at large. Ensuring Australia's biosecurity system is innovative, adequately resourced and operating efficiently is critical and should be a shared priority for governments, industry, and the broader community. In an increasingly complex global environment where international trade and travel will continue to increase significantly, the risk of major biosecurity threats entering and establishing in Australia is heightened. Added to this challenge is a changing climate, which will increasingly affect the range, habitat, spread and impact of invasive species – both known and yet to be identified. Changing demographics and patterns of land use are also altering the biosecurity risk profile. The NFF has long-standing concerns that resourcing of the national system – at a federal, state and territory level – is not keeping pace, and that the system may not be fit for the challenges of the future.

The NFF welcomes the Food Supply Chain Capacity Study's recognition of the importance of biosecurity skills and workers to the food supply chain. We strongly support JSA's objective to improve Australia's understanding of the occupations relevant to biosecurity, particularly as they relate to tertiary education and training.

The Discussion Paper correctly identifies the wide-ranging roles relevant to biosecurity and food safety in the supply chain.

Resourcing

A successful biosecurity system relies on sustained levels of well-targeted investment, underpinned by funding principles and arrangements that are nationally coordinated, consistently applied and well communicated. Funding should be linked to the growth of the biosecurity task, with priority given to the areas of greatest return on investment and high-risk pathways. This was, in part, delivered by the Albanese Government's 2023 budget measure, Sustainable biosecurity funding. However, it is imperative that funding and investment is sufficient, co-funded, transparent and sustainable in the longer-term.

Workforce

A robust workforce equipped with specialised knowledge and training is fundamental to the detection, prevention, and management of biosecurity threats. Ensuring the effectiveness of Australia's biosecurity system hinges upon cultivating a skilled and adequately resourced workforce. While all parts of food supply chain have a role to play in Australia's biosecurity system, the priority for governments must be the management of biosecurity risk at the border and pre-border, where the economic returns are greatest. The NFF continues to call for governments to prioritise attracting and retaining an appropriately skilled biosecurity workforce, including surveillance officers, diagnosticians, Northern Australian Quarantine Service officers, detector dogs and their handlers. Further, the NFF has long called for the removal of arbitrary Australian Government staff caps and the application of efficiency dividends for cost-recovered and critical biosecurity frontline functions. A competent and well-equipped workforce, supported by appropriate resourcing and sensible government decision-making frameworks, is critical to ensure that Australia

continues to successfully safeguard its unique ecosystems, agricultural industries, and public health.

Broadly, all participants in the national biosecurity system could benefit from additional biosecurity skills and experience. Improved awareness of biosecurity among producers, industry stakeholders, supply chains and the general community will support biosecurity readiness and is vital to ensure good biosecurity practices, compliance with legislated requirements, and the prevention and/or prompt management of incursions.

Questions

The NFF does not have any specific feedback on the discussion questions. While the NFF certainly has a policy on biosecurity — which informs our response to this part of the Study — the particulars of the workforce capacity and skills need in the biosecurity workforce are beyond our expertise. Indeed, it is our view that the (biosecurity) system needs an audit of existing skills and gaps, and future skills and workforce needs. That said, we strongly support and appreciate that JSA is considering biosecurity in the Study.



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