

Dedicated seasonal visa

Policy position statement

Position

The Council strongly supports the development and implementation of a well-designed AAV that meets design principles and settings outlined in this policy position statement.

Introduction

Australia needs a secure, reliable and productive seasonal labour workforce if we are to maintain productivity, meet market demands, sustain regional economies, and ultimately maintain our food security, and therefore, national security. Despite efforts to engage local labour, chronic workforce shortages persist, impacting productivity, increasing waste, and threatening the viability of many businesses.

The national horticulture industry is, to a greater or lesser extent, reliant on migrant labour to meet its seasonal picking, packing and pruning needs through both the PALM scheme, designed for the purpose of delivering a foreign aid outcome, and Working Holiday Maker program, design for the purpose of cultural exchange.

The national horticulture industry is incredibly diverse, including the crops grown, the production systems used, the physicality and specificity of harvest and other roles, regions and climates in which its based, and the purposes to which fresh produce is ultimately put. The mix of labour supply options available to horticultural businesses ideally reflects this diversity.

The Council is open to increasing complexity in visa products, so long as this complexity is a result of in-depth, considered and consultative design processes that arrived at visa products that meet its varied and unique needs. There remains room, and arguably a need, for additional seasonal labour supply solutions, particularly a surge workforce to meet peak harvest needs, including those that provide the industry with some of the reliability, productivity and worker protection benefits of PALM scheme, with more of the flexibility found in the WHM program.

An Australian Agriculture Visa (AAV) presents an opportunity to address chronic labour shortages in the horticulture sector, ensuring the industry's sustainability, growth, and contribution to the national economy. The NFF Horticulture Council (Council) supports a well-designed and effectively implemented AAV that balances the needs of growers, workers, and the broader community.

An AAV is intended to supplement and complement the existing workforce and support the industry's growth while safeguarding worker welfare and industry reputation.

Design principles

The Council recommends that an AAV be designed around five (5) core principles:

1. Flexibility and Portability
2. Fair Workplaces
3. Appropriate Length
4. the Right Numbers
5. Balanced Checks

Settings

An AAV should be implemented with consideration of the following settings:

1. **Eligible industries:** Employers engaging workers through the AAV must be limited to those in agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries.
2. **Eligible workers and requirements:** Workers eligible to engage with an AAV will be limited to those who meet health, character, employment and English language proficiency requirements.
3. **Personal responsibility.** Once in Australia, workers will have primary responsibility— albeit with sensible external supports — for their own costs, pastoral care, and welfare and wellbeing. This also means they will have the freedom to move between employers.
4. **Market failure:** An AAV must be a supplemental labour option in only those circumstances where the local labour market has failed, as demonstrated through employment data and conditions.
5. **Simplicity and Accessibility:** An AAV application process should be streamlined, minimizing administrative burdens for both employers and workers while maintaining rigorous standards to ensure compliance.
6. **Employer Accountability:** Employers accessing an AAV should demonstrate a commitment to ethical employment standards, including compliance with workplace laws and financial solvency.
7. **Pathways to Permanency:** An AAV should include transparent and accessible pathways to permanency for workers who demonstrate long-term commitment and value to the sector, contributing to workforce stability and skill retention.
8. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** A robust monitoring and evaluation framework is essential to ensure an AAV meets its objectives, supports workers' rights, and adapts to industry needs over time.

Conclusion

The Council recognizes the potential of an AAV to support the industry's labour needs sustainably while protecting workers' rights and upholding community standards. Effective implementation of an AAV will strengthen the horticulture sector, boost regional economies, and contribute to Australia's food security and export capacity.

Version 1.0

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