

PALM scheme

Policy position statement

Position

The Council supports the PALM scheme in its role as a strategic supplement to Australia's agricultural and regional workforce while prioritizing employment opportunities for domestic workers.

We advocate for a balanced approach that provides for both employer benefits and robust worker protections. The scheme should maintain transparent governance with industry input and be subject to continuous improvement through evidence-based evaluations and stakeholder feedback.

Overview

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is designed to address critical labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture and regional industries. Originating from the consolidation of the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), the PALM scheme facilitates temporary migration from Pacific nations, providing significant economic and social benefits to both Australia and participating countries.

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.

Since its inception as a pilot in 2008, the PALM scheme has experienced rapid growth particularly through the COVID-19 pandemic, with just over 30,000 workers engaged across Australia as at the start of 2025. Despite its success, challenges remain, including employer compliance burdens, worker mobility, and balancing employer demand amidst uncertainty created by government changes to settings that have not appeared targeted or proportionate in addressing issues.

Horticulture has demonstrated a keen interest in the scheme as an alternate source of reliable, productive labour but employers in the industry faces unique challenges in meeting scheme requirements arising from the uncertainty around crop maturity,

operational susceptibility to changes in the weather, and the perishable nature of produce.

This policy seeks to outline the NFF Horticulture Council (**Council**) principles and key measures as they relate to the PALM scheme. It primarily focuses on ensuring the scheme's effective implementation at the Commonwealth level, balancing workforce needs with domestic employment priorities, and enhancing mutual benefits for all stakeholders.

Policy principles

The Council advocates for the following principles to be applied in the design of the PALM scheme:

1. Workforce Supplementation

The PALM scheme must be a strategic supplement to the domestic workforce, addressing critical labour shortages without undermining job opportunities for Australians. PALM should be a viable source of migrant labour for agriculture, an important part of the toolkit along with other mechanisms, ensuring a diverse workforce that supports industry needs.

The PALM scheme must remain demand driven and not be designed in a way to compromise or undercut other migration programs. The Federal Government should not elevate the PALM scheme as having primacy relative to other sources of migrant labour.

2. Employer Productivity

The program should be cost-effective for employers, minimizing administrative burdens while maintaining compliance with workplace standards to ensure the viability and productivity of farms and regional businesses.

As a design principle, the PALM scheme should enable equitable access for all employers, regardless of their size, and that an objective for the scheme should be increasing proportions of the PALM workforce being engaged directly and not through labour hire providers.

3. Balanced and Transparent Program Administration

The program requires clear governance with industry input, independent administration, and data transparency to monitor the program's impact on workforce needs. Administrators need regular feedback from host employers, Approved Employers and workers to capture emerging issues and inform continuous improvement of the scheme.

The scheme Deed and Guidelines must wherever possible be consistent with and not provide for benefits above existing workplace law.

Measures to deliver on principles

1. Streamlined Administrative Processes

Reduce administrative burdens on employers by improving efficiency by streamlining recruitment, visa processing, and reporting requirements. Support the development of a centralized digital platform to enhance documentation, compliance, and communication with relevant authorities.

Promote greater flexibility in the meeting of Approved Employer requirements, including through their being framed as outcomes rather than prescriptive activities or outputs, which do not account for diverse employment and operational circumstances.

Remove duplication in monitoring and compliance activities, including through recognising other government agency or ethical sourcing programs and associated audits. Apply a risk-based approach to scheme compliance activities.

2. Cost-Effective Participation for Employers

Ensure cost-effective participation for Employers by reducing financial burdens. Explore financial incentives, concessions or subsidies, including those that enable investment in accommodation infrastructure or the reimbursement of recruitment costs when workers disengage, to encourage and enable employer uptake while maintaining program sustainability.

Promote a more inclusive scheme across various farm sizes to ensure that all stakeholders can benefit. The scheme should be easily accessible to all businesses, especially small employers to facilitate participation.

3. Scheme integrity

Invest in initiatives designed to discourage both PALM workers disengaging from the scheme and third parties from engaging in practices that ultimately results in worker disengagement. This could include, among other things, in prioritizing the processing of claims for asylum.

All stakeholders to actively promote and support the scheme, and particularly relevant Federal Government ministers and agencies, wherever necessary correcting false and misleading claims about the scheme and those engaged in it.

3. Flexible Location Arrangements

Explore flexible location arrangements to enhance employer productivity and worker satisfaction. This may include exploring worker portability across employers within a defined geographic area and establishing a centralized worker pool for improved workforce allocation. At the same time, ensure that employers are not disadvantaged or incur additional costs as a result.

4. Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Establish publicly available key performance indicators (**KPIs**) to track progress against program goals, including employer and worker satisfaction and economic outcomes. The findings from these evaluations should be used to make evidence-based policy adjustments and inform continuous improvement of the PALM scheme.

Implement an evaluation framework that includes employer and workers surveys, stakeholder consultations, and regular reviews. These activities should capture contemporary evidence on outcomes for employers and workers. PALMIS should be designed in a way to minimise the burden of responding to evaluations. Feedback or perspectives of scheme performance not based on evidence or direct testimony from those directly involved in the scheme should be heavily discounted.

Governance structures responsible for oversight and continuous improvement of the scheme should include the full diversity of stakeholder with an interest in its success, including peak industry bodies.

Associated documents

- PALM scheme Approved Employer Guidelines
- PALM scheme Approved Employer Deed of Agreement
- Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Information System (**PALMIS**) information and resources

Version 1.0

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