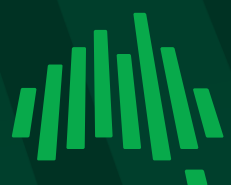


Response to the Jobs and Skills
*Roadmap for Regional Australia –
Phase 1 Report*

Submission by National Farmers Federation

30 September 2025



The National Farmers' Federation

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

We were 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



Executive Summary

The National Farmers' Federation (**NFF**) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Jobs and Skills Australia's (**JSA**) *Jobs and Skills Roadmap for Regional Australia – Phase 1 Report*. Farmers are a cornerstone of regional economies, providing food security, export earnings, and sustaining rural communities. Yet, agriculture faces persistent and acute workforce pressures that must be addressed if the sector is to remain strong viable and productive.

We support the vision set out in the Roadmap to enhance the equity, effectiveness and efficiency of the jobs and skills system across regional Australia. However, for this vision to be realised, the unique needs of agriculture must be recognised and explicitly embedded in Phase 2 of the Roadmap.

The NFF submission highlights five key areas of concern: persistent labour shortages; skills and training gaps; barriers to workforce participation; migration and visa complexity; and the need to improve the attractiveness of agricultural careers. It also outlines opportunities for reform that align closely with the Roadmap's vision principles and broader national strategies such as the Net Zero Transition, Future Made in Australia, and Closing the Gap.

Agriculture and Regional Workforce Challenges

Labour Supply Pressures

Agriculture continues to face what is fundamentally a labour supply problem. Farm businesses report ongoing difficulties in filling both skilled and unskilled roles, with shortages particularly severe in seasonal industries such as horticulture. These shortages place downward pressure on productivity, increase costs for farm businesses, and ultimately threaten food supply chains and Australia's international competitiveness.

Skills Gaps and Training Limitations

The training system is not sufficiently aligned with the realities of modern farming. While the agricultural workforce increasingly relies on advanced technologies, biosecurity practices and climate-smart techniques, vocational and higher education pathways have not kept pace. Completion rates for apprenticeships and traineeships remain low, with regional students often facing additional barriers such as limited accommodation,

travel distances and the thin delivery markets that make it difficult for TAFEs and RTOs to maintain consistent offerings.

Migration and Visa Complexity

For many farm businesses, migration is essential to filling workforce gaps. The PALM and WHM programs provide critical access to seasonal and entry-level workers, while skilled migration is needed for more specialised roles. However, visa processes remain complex, costly and slow, and recognition of overseas qualifications is inconsistent and time consuming. These administrative burdens discourage participation in migration schemes and limit access to much-needed workers.

Barriers to Participation

Regional disengagement among young people is particularly concerning, with one in six not in education, training or employment. This represents not only a loss of potential talent for the sector but also a broader risk to regional social and economic wellbeing. Barriers such as a lack of affordable housing, transport, childcare, and foundational skills in literacy and numeracy prevent many from participating in the workforce. Unless these barriers are addressed, the sector will struggle to attract and retain the next generation of agricultural workers.

Perceptions of Agricultural Careers

Despite being modern, safe, and rewarding, agricultural jobs often suffer from outdated and negative stereotypes. Farm work is too often seen as insecure, unsafe or low-skilled, when in fact it offers meaningful careers with pathways to innovation and leadership. Addressing perceptions is just as important as addressing structural barriers if agriculture is to compete for talent.

Opportunities for Reform

The NFF sees clear opportunities to strengthen the regional jobs and skills system in ways that deliver for the agriculture industry and align with the vision principles of the Roadmap.

First, there is a pressing need to support people who face barriers to participation. Subsidised housing, childcare and transport solutions are critical to enabling jobseekers to take up work on farms. Wrap-around services for disadvantaged groups, particularly disengaged youth, should be embedded in employment support programs. Programs that build aspiration

and connect schools with local employers in agriculture would help inspire young people to see farming as a viable career pathway.

Second, agricultural skills and training pathways require targeted investment. A dedicated Agricultural Trade Apprenticeship, co-designed with industry, would help build a structured pipeline of skilled workers. Micro-credentials in areas such as farm safety, biosecurity, ag-tech and sustainability would enable both new entrants and existing workers to build skills more flexibly. To ensure training remains available in thin markets, block-grant funding models should be piloted for agricultural RTOs and TAFEs, allowing them to deliver consistently in regions where activity-based funding is not viable.

Third, quality jobs must remain at the heart of workforce reform. Farmers have already invested heavily in improving workplace safety, accommodation, and employment standards, and this progress should be recognised and built upon. Public campaigns that highlight agriculture as a modern, rewarding and technologically advanced industry would be an important complement to these efforts, helping shift perceptions and attract new workers. The NFF is ready to work in partnership with the Government to launch these campaigns.

Fourth, migration policy must be made more simple, accessible and responsive to the needs of regional industries. Simplifying participation in the PALM scheme, reducing costs for employers, and accelerating recognition of overseas qualifications would unlock significant productivity benefits. Piloting family accompaniment within PALM would also help improve retention and community integration.

Finally, better data and metrics are needed to support workforce planning. Agriculture-specific measures such as farm job vacancy fill rates, apprenticeship completions in agriculture, and utilisation of migration programs should be embedded into JSA's evaluation framework. Regional workforce "hubs" could provide a central point of connection between jobseekers, training providers and farm employers, improving the efficiency of matching labour supply with demand.

Conclusion

Agriculture is central to the prosperity of regional Australia, but the sector's future is threatened by persistent workforce challenges. JSA's Roadmap provides a welcome opportunity to address these challenges in a structured and collaborative way.

The NFF urges JSA to ensure that Phase 2 of the Roadmap places agriculture at the forefront of regional workforce planning. By embedding agriculture-specific measures, supporting targeted training and funding models, simplifying migration, and addressing barriers to participation, government and industry can together build a skilled, resilient and sustainable agricultural workforce.

Farmers stand ready to partner with JSA and other stakeholders in shaping these reforms and ensuring that regional Australia thrives into the future.

Recommendations

In the circumstances the NFF recommends that Phase 2 of the Regional Roadmap should:

- Explicitly recognise agriculture as a priority sector in regional workforce planning.
- Establish a dedicated agricultural apprenticeship and training model, co-designed with industry.
- Pilot block-grant funding for agricultural training providers to ensure service delivery in thin markets.
- Incorporate agriculture-specific workforce metrics in JSA's evaluative framework.
- Streamline migration and visa pathways, including faster skills recognition for overseas workers.
- Expand supports for housing, childcare, transport and foundation skills in regional areas.
- Fund national campaigns to improve perceptions of agriculture as a career.
- Work in partnership with the NFF to co-design and launch national campaigns that improve perceptions of agriculture as a career.



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