

**National
Farmers
Federation**

National Farmers' Federation submission – Annual Wage Review 2026

March 2026



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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NFF's key messages

- The NFF submits the Expert Panel should adopt a cautious and sustainable approach to adjustments to the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and modern award minimum wages.
- Agriculture is award-reliant, small-business, regional and price-taking. Wage increases flow quickly to cost base, with limited ability to recover costs through prices, particularly in the current environment.
- The Review should avoid outcomes that reduce employment opportunities, hours, training, and entry-level pathways, particularly in seasonal and labour-intensive farm sectors.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

Agriculture context relevant to wage-setting

- Small and regional employers: Many farms are small businesses with limited administrative and financial buffers to withstand wage shocks.
- Seasonal labour demand: Short peak windows mean wage shocks during peak periods that in turn have an outsized impact on viability and hiring.
- Award reliance and complexity: Agricultural work often sits squarely in award structures; minimum wage movements translate directly into payroll cost.
- Price-taking reality: Many producers cannot pass higher costs of wage increases through (export parity, supermarket dynamics, commodity cycles).
- Agricultural employers are presently operating in an environment of compounded cost pressure, including labour, diesel, freight, packaging, compliance, and other essential inputs, while remaining largely unable to recover those increases through prices in a timely manner.
- In labour-intensive and perishable farm sectors, additional labour cost is not simply absorbed as reduced margin. In some cases, it changes the commercial decision whether particular crops, grades, harvest passes or retail pack formats will even be viable at all.
- For many horticultural businesses, packaging is not a minor overhead but a core cost. Increases in packaging and plastic cots, combined with labour and freight pressure, can make some supplier programs uneconomic and unviable.
- Volatile and elevated fuel and freight costs have a disproportionate impact on regional and remote communities, where transport, field operations, cold chain, and contractors are diesel dependant.
- These circumstances in conjunction with unsustainable wage increases will result in reduced profitability, fewer seasonal jobs, fewer entry-level roles, reduced harvest activity, and lower planted areas.
- Ultimately the Panel must balance wage growth with the preservation of employment. Excessive increases risk reducing labour demand, as farmers adjust by cutting hours or roles, or absorbing additional workloads themselves—outcomes that carry clear implications for safety, workforce sustainability, and long-term productivity.

Statutory objectives and balance

- The NFF submits the Panel should apply the minimum wages and modern awards objectives in a way that balances:
 - a fair safety net for low-paid workers, with
 - sustainable employment, business viability, productivity, and the needs of regional communities.
- In agriculture, a wage outcome that materially exceeds underlying economic conditions risks:
 - reduced hiring and fewer seasonal roles,
 - reduced hours and work opportunities for entry-level workers,
 - deferred investment in productivity, training, and safety systems.

Entry-level rates and wage-structure issues

- The NFF submits the Panel should protect entry-level pathways into agricultural work.
 - In particular, any proposal or signal from the Fair Work Commission that would make C12 the effective minimum “floor” (through removal/phasing-out of C13 or equivalent entry-level settings) should be approached with caution because it may:
 - raise the cost of taking on new entrants who require training and supervision,
 - reduce the availability of genuine entry jobs in seasonal environments,
 - weaken regional participation pathways.
 - Ultimately, it is important to clarify that there remain two classifications currently set below C12—namely, C13 and C14.
 - In particular, the C14 classification continues to operate as a legitimate entry-level rate. While the changes effective from January 2025 establish the C13 rate as the practical minimum for ongoing roles, the C14 rate (equivalent to Farm and Livestock Hand Level 1 under the Pastoral Award 2020) remains the minimum applicable classification for new entrants on a temporary basis, generally limited to an initial engagement period of up to six months.
 - If any structural change is contemplated, NFF submits it should occur only with:
 - clear evidence of need,
 - genuine consultation and impact assessment (including regional/small business effects),
 - practical transition arrangements and adequate lead time.

NFF recommendations

- Determine a modest, economically responsible adjustment to the NMW and award minimum wages that supports sustainable employment in award-reliant sectors.
- Ensure the outcome does not unintentionally reduce entry-level opportunities or constrain seasonal recruitment.
- Treat any wage-structure changes affecting entry classifications (including any C13/C12 implications) as requiring separate, evidence-based consideration with adequate transition planning.



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