



Skilling our workforce

Developing a skilled and available workforce is critical to the prosperity of Australian agriculture

Skilled labour is vital to ensure the agriculture sector remains internationally competitive. Manual labour is increasingly being replaced by GPS-guided tractors, computerised irrigation systems, laser levellers and sophisticated harvesting technologies. The new workforce requires specific technical skills to suit this work environment. The Government is committed to ensuring all Australian industries, including agriculture, have access to a skilled and flexible workforce.

Education

At schools around the country the Government is making sure young Australians are learning about the importance of agriculture. **The Agriculture in Education initiative is providing \$2 million over two years** to assist teachers in educating children on the products and processes associated with food and fibre production.

The Government is improving the higher education system to make more Commonwealth subsidised places available at

a wider range of institutions, including TAFEs and private agricultural institutions.

The Government will help more farming families to support their children undertaking further study. The Family Assets Test will be removed from 1 January 2016, meaning farm assets will no longer be counted in parental means testing for youth income support payments. More students will now qualify to access an average annual payment of more than \$7,000.

Skills

Successful farmers need a wide range of skills—finance and business management, IT, animal husbandry and crop management. Farm labourers also need specific technical skills (for example to manage GPS-guided tractors or computerised irrigation systems).

Under the **Vocational Education Training Reform Agenda, the Government is already investing \$664 million in the Industry Skills Fund** to support up to 250,000 training places and support services to meet specific business needs.

Agribusiness has priority access to this programme. Eligible businesses, agricultural peak industry bodies or other consortia can apply to undertake Industry Skills Fund projects to benefit farmers.

Foreign workers

While the first priority is to employ Australian workers, Australian workers are not always available to meet the labour demands of the agriculture sector. Farmers need access to both skilled and unskilled labour to make sure gaps are filled and farm businesses can achieve their production potential.

All temporary foreign workers have the same rights and protections as Australian workers. The Fair Work Ombudsman and Department of Immigration and Border Protection are being proactive in assisting overseas workers in the agriculture sector.

Skilled labour

The **Temporary Work (Skilled) visa (subclass 457)** programme can help farmers and others in the agriculture supply chain fill some skilled roles.

A Ministerial Advisory Council will review the list of occupations available for sponsorship. We want to make sure the list meets the needs of industry.

The Government is **increasing flexibility and streamlining the process of applying for 457 visas**.

We are also working to develop labour agreements. Agreements allow industry bodies to negotiate concessions to some of the visa requirements in defined circumstances, helping them access the skilled workers they need. Developing industry-wide agreements (such as pork or meat processing) reduces the red tape for filling a skills gap.

Seasonal Worker Programme

The **Seasonal Worker Programme** allows producers to engage low skilled or unskilled workers from Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste. Importantly, workers can return each year.

The Government has expanded the programme by:

- broadening access to all agricultural industries;
- removing the annual cap on the number of workers from 1 July 2015;

- removing the minimum stay requirement of 14 weeks, provided workers receive a net financial benefit of at least \$1,000 during their stay; and
- simplifying cost sharing arrangements by combining the employer's contribution to the seasonal workers' international and domestic airfare to a total of \$500.

Employers still need to test the local labour market and provide employment to suitable Australian job seekers. The Minister for Employment will also have discretion to rule out certain regions.

Backpackers

Agriculture is a major employer of Working Holiday visa holders.

Working Holiday (417) visa holders are able to extend their visa by 12 months if they work for three months in regional areas in selected industries, including agriculture. This privilege will now also apply to **Work and Holiday (462) visa holders** who work for three months in agriculture in northern Australia. The Government is considering requests from new countries to participate in the **Work and Holiday programme (462 visa)**.

Streamlining superannuation

The Government has expanded access to the **Small Business Superannuation Clearing House**—to those with an annual turnover below \$2 million or fewer than 20 employees. Eligible employers can now pay superannuation contributions in one transaction to a single location with this online service.

We are also reducing the compliance burden of superannuation contributions for businesses employing foreign workers. **From 1 July 2015 employers will no longer have to offer a standard superannuation fund choice form to temporary resident employees.**

Further Information

- agwhitepaper.agriculture.gov.au