



Harvest Labour Services: Reforms to encourage Australian job seekers to take up seasonal work

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About AUSVEG:

AUSVEG is the National Peak Industry Body representing the interests of Australian vegetable and potato growers. AUSVEG represents growers from throughout Australia and works to ensure the National Vegetable Levy and the National Potato Levy are invested in areas that best meet industry needs.

AUSVEG also delivers national projects in the areas of communication, environmental sustainability, biosecurity, export development and market access on behalf of industry.

AUSVEG welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Harvest Labour Services Reforms to encourage Australian job seekers to take up seasonal work (Consultation paper).

Opening comments:

AUSVEG has been a strong advocate for the Australian Horticulture industry being able to access a competent and reliable workforce.

AUSVEG growers will always have a preference and willingness to engage and employ local people where possible, but in most areas there are insufficient people willing and able to meet the demand.

Horticulture growers require a sizable workforce at specific times of the year to cater for their harvest period. This means a sizeable casual workforce is needed for varying times depending on the commodity grown, location and time of year.

Vegetable and potato growers, however are well established businesses who provide product all year round, which also requires a more consistent harvest labour workforce.



Questions for feedback:

- 1. Are there any major horticultural regions where employers are experiencing recruitment difficulties, which are not included in this list? What are these recruitment difficulties? Where are they?**

AUSVEG is supportive of the expansion of the Harvest Labour Service across a number of horticulture growing regions throughout Australia.

AUSVEG would support further additions be made to the 16 growing regions to include the Queensland region of Bowen, as well as the Western Australian region of Carnarvon and the Northern Adelaide Plains and Mallee regions in South Australia.

Bowen accounts for more than 13% of Queensland's vegetable production, at just under \$170m. It is also a significant employer for that region.

Carnarvon is also a significant horticulture growing region with about 170 plantations producing about \$90m worth of Horticulture produce.

The Northern Adelaide Plains represent \$300m in farmgate production, while the Mallee region represents \$200m.

The expansions presented in the consultation paper, as well as the additions of Bowen, Carnarvon and the Northern Adelaide Plains and Mallee regions would be positive change to the service.

- 2. Which of these regions represent an opportunity to get more Australian job seekers into horticultural work? In which regions might this be difficult to achieve? Why?**

All the regions listed, as well as Bowen and Carnarvon, represent opportunity for Australian job seekers to work in Horticulture. There is a range of skilled, semi-skilled and lower-skilled roles, as well as a number of career opportunities for Australians in horticulture.

The issue of population and getting people out to the regions will continue to be problematic, but that is a situation not limited to agriculture. Regions further away from capital cities are the most likely to be significantly impacted by this.

While continuity of work will also create challenges in different horticulture regions, with Australian job seekers looking for ongoing and often full-time employment opportunities.



3. Do the proposed regions allow providers to deliver a locally tailored service? If not, how could this be achieved?

Yes, throughout Australia there are a number of businesses and/or organisations who are able to deliver this service in specific regions.

This will however, likely require the Harvest Labour Service to engage with a number of different entities Australia-wide to ensure the service is delivered adequately to each region.

4. Should a Harvest Labour Services provider be required to service a region in its entirety or be able to select specific areas? Why?

Providers should be able to demonstrate a capacity to deliver the service to a region in its entirety.

Providers should demonstrate their own capacity to deliver the service, or show the capacity to work with contractors, or sub-contractors to other organisations to ensure the service delivery expectations are met.

5. Should the current list of eligible placements be maintained, or should it be broadened to include other activities or crops? If so why?

AUSVEG is comfortable with the current list of eligible placements.

6. What would enable HLS providers to effectively package consecutive seasonal work placements? If breaks between placements are allowed, what should be the maximum break duration?

The horticulture industry is quite varied, with different commodities and different regions having very different harvest periods, and sometimes different harvest challenges.

It would be encouraging to see HLS providers package consecutive seasonal work placements, particularly in similar regions, or with similar commodities. That should lead to some improved efficiency for growers and likely lead to increased grower engagement in the service.



Length of breaks between placements should be determined through consultation with each region to better understand their challenges and help meet the needs for the growers.

7. What should the minimum hourly threshold be for an HLS Outcome Payment? (e.g. 25+ hours/week, average or total hours at the end of the outcome period)?

Flexibility in this space is important, as every business, and every commodity is different.

Total hours at the end of the outcome period provides the most flexibility of the options canvassed in this question. Payments could then be scaled to commensurate with total hours worked.

8. How can HLS providers be encouraged to coordinate and deliver assistance to Australian job seekers to address barriers to take up a harvest placement?

The new incentive structure as proposed in the Consultation Paper is a positive step in encouraging HLS providers to take greater interest in the long-term participation of job seekers in the horticulture industry.

Many barriers to taking up, and then staying in a harvest placement are likely attributable to job seekers not receiving a realistic job preview. Perceptions of work in horticulture could be improved by giving job seekers a better understanding and appreciation of the tasks and responsibilities involved before they're formally engaged. In addition, a realistic job preview continues to reduce turnover throughout a placement as unpleasant aspects of the job don't take the job seeker by surprise.

Completing a realistic job preview should be considered as a pre-condition to a job seeker taking up a placement. HLS providers should be encouraged to coordinate the provision of job previews with industry bodies and their grower members.

Negative past experience with Australian unemployed Job Active clients is widely experienced among growers and has a large impact on their willingness to employ Australians through the HLS program.

Consideration should be given to extending outcome payments to employers.



9. How can collaboration between HLS providers and employment service providers be maximised?

Collaboration between HLS and employment service providers could be improved by enabling the sharing of outcome payments.

10. What should NHLIS look like from July 2020? Are there opportunities to improve the service to better respond to the needs of users? Does the telephone service continue to play an important role? How can social media be used to more effectively connect with harvest workers and employers?

The NHLIS could be improved by incorporating a better flow of timely and accurate information. This includes information from and links to existing services and programs delivered through industry bodies and government agencies.

The NHLIS could also be improved by gathering and collating data on the employee job placements.

With about 25,000 employees assigned to jobs each year, and it predicted to increase to 35,000 jobs each year, it is important to better understand if those placements have been successful.

Follow-up information in regards to how long the employee stayed in the role, was it a day? A week? 3 months? A year? – Was the employer satisfied with the employee and their output? – was the employee offered further career opportunities within the business or the industry.

This information would help better understand the success of the current service, while also creating a data set for each region as to the effectiveness of the service and where it can be improved in the future.

11. Does the Harvest Trail jobs board currently meet the needs of stakeholders? How could the quality of this vacancy listing service be improved?

It is likely the current jobs board is under utilised by vegetable and potato growers at the moment. Direct engagement with growers who use the jobs board, could provide strong feedback on how the system could be improved.

Recognition on the site of who is a Fair Farms employer, or a SEDEX accredited employer, could also be included on the listings to help give applicants confidence in the business they are applying to work at.



12. Could some of the activities currently undertaken by NHLIS be better undertaken by locally based HLS providers? If yes, what activities?

The value of information is a product of its timeliness, accuracy and relevance. It is arguable then most if not all activities undertaken centrally by NHLIS could be undertaken more quickly and in more detail locally, either by HLS providers, or by the relevant industry body.

13. Who uses the Harvest Trail Guide? Is it still needed? Does it need to be provided in hard copy format for some users? Who are these users?

The value of timely, relevant and accurate information should not be understated. An immediate online data and information source that was easy to follow would be sufficient.

14. How can interested parties be engaged to co-design these industry-led projects?

Engagement with Peak Industry Bodies would be an acceptable starting point for engagement in the co-design.

15. How can we make these programs, trials and initiatives work more effectively together?

Better and more detailed data from the provider on how the worker has performed in the role, the length of time they have remained employed, and whether or not they have continued to search for roles within the horticulture industry is vitally important to improving the effectiveness of the service.

The service must provide more detailed information of the ongoing placements of the employee on farm, in order for the full success of the service to be compared and improved.

Effective delivery of the service needs to be through more engagement with growers through peak industry bodies. Industry bodies will be able to assist with strong promotion and implementation, as a number of growers are still apprehensive about using HLS, as they have a lack of confidence in the process which has been built up over a long period of time.

Engagement with industry bodies at a state and national level, who have a strong grower network, will help raise the understanding of the program at grower level and potentially increase grower take up.

Industry bodies have substantial grower networks and credibility in this area, but proper resourcing would need to be considered for the service to be rolled out in a meaningful way.



Effective service implementation can also be delivered where it is run by the same organization in the one region.

Service providers as part of their contract should be required to convene periodic reference groups with industry bodies. This process should be used to raise and triage issues. In Queensland, the local Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN) representatives will be best placed to contribute to reference groups.

It would also be useful if Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business funded initiatives to assist job seekers to train and engage with industry during their journey to employment. For example, funding for industry excursions, work experience and work trials as well as industry led community services such as Centerlink implications for family households relating to changes to employment situations, Fair Work advice and workplace health and safety, work roles and responsibilities and effective communication in the workplace. These and other job readiness services are lacking and not meeting employer expectations.

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