

Plan for Australia's Horticulture Harvest Workforce

Summary

The dire situation for Australia's Horticulture Harvest Workforce now threatens the availability of fruit and vegetables for all Australians at the supermarket; with modelled shortages of up to 26,000 workers into 2021. Immediate action is required by all governments to implement solutions for the 2021 harvest. Any shortages of fruit and vegetables in the lead up to Christmas will need to be managed – short term crisis solutions are unlikely to increase the available workforce quickly.

1. Support Australians and Permanent Residents

The range of Commonwealth, State and Territory measures and incentives to support Australians and Permanent Residents into horticulture harvest work are welcomed by industry. The number of Australians applying for horticulture harvest work has declined over the last 30 years due to the seasonal nature of the work and the significant alternative opportunities in the Australian economy. Industry requires that all Governments:

- Continue the new initiatives implemented in response to COVID19
- Engage with industry to trial new measures and incentives

2. Substantively restart Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme

The restart of the Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme announced by the Prime Minister and supported by Premiers and Chief Ministers was welcomed by industry. Unfortunately, less than 1,000 Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme visa holders have entered Australia – well short of the 14,000 visa holders who came to Australia last year. The 6,000 SWP visa holders who are still in Australia due to COVID will return to their countries in increasingly large numbers from December due to more repatriation flights. Industry immediately requires of all governments:

- A large scale restart of the Seasonal Worker Programme to bring 14,000 workers to Australia
- Supporting quarantine arrangements to be implemented by state and territory governments to support a national response

3. Introduce a Harvest Work Visa

If the workforce shortages continue to escalate and result in shortages of fruit and vegetables on shelf, immediate action will be required to enable a horticulture harvest workforce. Industry requires the Commonwealth Government to immediately implement the proposal which will:

- Fill the gap between the Working Holiday Maker Visa and Seasonal Worker Programme visa types to address industry's needs and provide an appropriate visa policy mix, understanding the current over-reliance on the WHM program.
- Create a 9-month working visa allowing workers from a single country to work in horticulture, with the ability to return year on year
- Be capped at 10,000 visas per year

Longer Term Initiatives

Working Holiday Makers (WHM)

The WHM program should be restarted when the Australian border is open to international arrivals.

Refugees

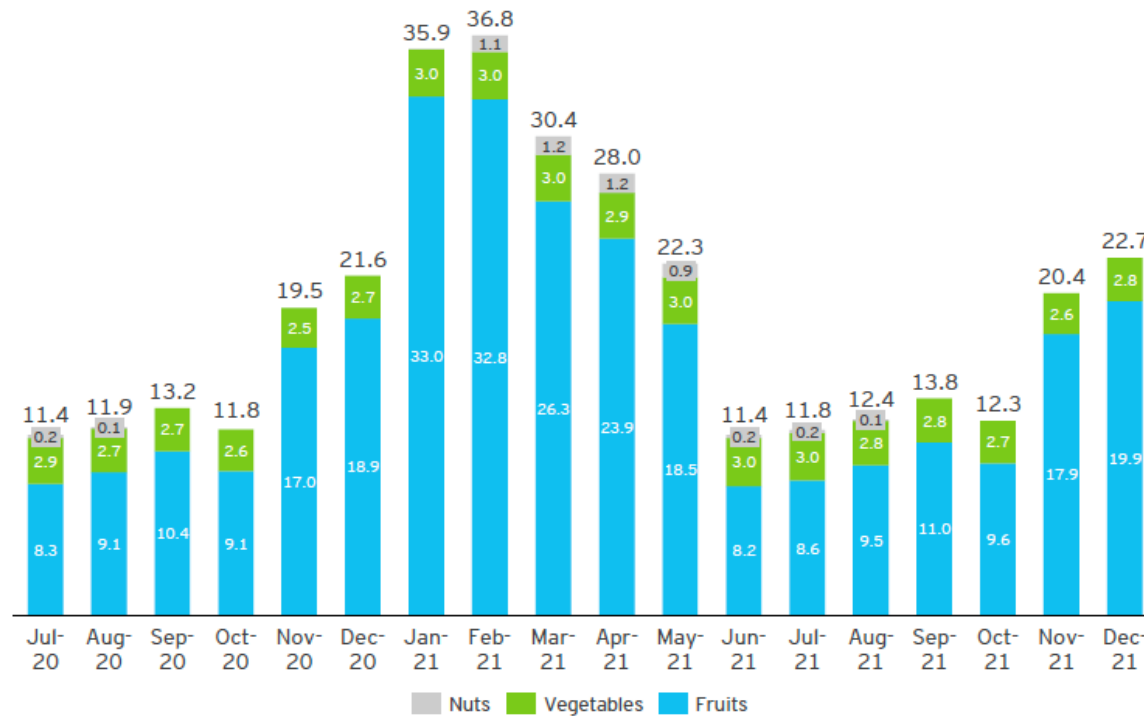
Industry is working with refugee communities within Australia to match job seekers with work.

Indigenous Australians

Industry has begun conversations about providing more opportunities for Indigenous Australians to take up roles in horticulture, but the focus will be on long term support.

Projected Horticulture Harvest Workforce Requirements into 2021

Total forecasted casual labour requirements, by commodity group ('000s headcount, Jul 2020 - Dec 2021)



Key highlights

- ▶ Peak demand for casual labour is expected to occur between February 2021 and May 2021
- ▶ For vegetables, casual labour requirements are consistent throughout the year as some commodities can be harvested all year round
- ▶ The peak of demand is expected to occur between April 2021 - July 2021
- ▶ Casual labour demand is expected to be highest for fruit commodities
- ▶ Peak in demand for casual labour is expected to occur between January 2021 - April 2021, corresponding to peak harvest for commodities such as table grapes, berries, melons, apples, pears and mangoes

Source: 'Seasonal horticulture labour demand and workforce study Public report – September 2020' funded by Hort Innovation.