

## **Inquiry into the impact of climate change on Queensland agricultural production**

**Submission No:** 5  
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Committee Secretary  
State Development and Regional Industries Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
Brisbane Qld 4000

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To the Committee Secretary,

**Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the impact of climate change on Queensland agricultural production**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry. My current research<sup>1</sup> investigates the experiences of temporary migrant farm workers in regional Queensland. I have spent many months during 2022-23 conducting interviews with horticultural workers, as well as local businesses, community, and industry stakeholders that employ, accommodate, and support these migrant workers.

A key theme in the interview data is the uncertainty about how increasingly severe or unseasonable weather will affect the migrant workforce that many Queensland farms rely upon. This will directly impact on the ability for growers to maintain a reliable and safe international workforce, and many people within regional communities with whom I have spoken are concerned. My submission addresses the first point of the Terms of Reference:

*Point a) the impacts of climate change and climate variability on Queensland agricultural production and the existing and potential future risks of climate change on the sector.*

Poor weather, severe events, and variable seasons are nothing new to growers, but the predictions of more frequent and extreme weather in a warming climate means that growers will need additional ways to support, maintain, and reduce the risks for those who are in weather-dependent roles. Migrant horticultural workers are often in casual or seasonal contracts, and are relatively low-paid (and therefore have little financial security to endure periods of low or no work due to inclement weather). Yet, they do the bulk of horticultural work at peak harvest times.<sup>2</sup> The disruption or cancellation of numerous workdays (or weeks) due to unseasonable weather impacts significantly on migrant workers – especially for those who are on temporary visa programs that incentivise or stipulate minimum weekly hours to meet visa requirements.

In this submission I draw on data published in a recent report<sup>3</sup> that summarises the findings of 44 interviews with stakeholders across industry, government, and community organisations in Queensland, and 45 interviews with workers. The findings highlight the precarity of the cohorts labouring under the two main visa programs that serve the horticultural sector: the Working Holiday Maker program and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme.

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1 I receive funding an Australian Research Council – Discovery Early Career Researcher Award, 2022-2025 (project number DE220100394).

2 Duffy et al. 2019. Demand for farm workers: ABARES farm surveys 2018. Available at:

[https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/abares/DemandForFarmWorkers\\_FarmSurveys2018\\_v1.0.0.pdf](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/abares/DemandForFarmWorkers_FarmSurveys2018_v1.0.0.pdf)

3 *Turbulent Times: The State of Backpacking and Seasonal Farm Work in Australia, 2023* [Report]. Available at:

[https://www.griffith.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/1686104/Turbulent-Times\\_The-state-of-backpacking-and-seasonal-farm-work\\_2023-report.pdf](https://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/1686104/Turbulent-Times_The-state-of-backpacking-and-seasonal-farm-work_2023-report.pdf)

## Context – temporary migration in Queensland horticulture

Horticulture relies heavily on casualised or seasonal contract migrant workers who are on temporary visas. The two main visas that structure migrant workers' participation in horticultural labour are the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM). Both visas have either incentivised (WHM) or specified (PALM) work requirements to fulfil the visa conditions.

The Working Holiday Maker visa (subclasses 417 & 462), commonly known as the “backpacker” visa, attracts young people up to 30 years of age<sup>4</sup> for an initial year. The WHM visa attracts backpackers from over 40 participating countries and jurisdictions. Backpackers have become a staple source of farming labour, due to the engineering of visa extensions granted in exchange for “specified work”.<sup>5</sup> Initially granted a one-year visa, WHMs can extend to two years if three-months of specified work is undertaken (usually in farming, but also incorporates tourism and other designated regional jobs), and a final third-year can be extended after an additional six-months of approved work. Currently there are more than 110,000 WHMs in Australia.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the backpackers is the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme<sup>7</sup> that caters for nine Pacific Island nations and Timor-Leste. The visa is open to people aged 21 years and over and, unlike the backpacker visa, many participants on the PALM scheme have families and dependents back home, and therefore rely upon this visa scheme for remittance and saving. PALM workers are tied to one employer for either a “seasonal” nine-month contract, or up to four years in a full-time position. PALM workers are contracted to an “Approved Employer” who facilitates their visa, return flights, and organises their accommodation, local transportation, and work. Statistics from June 2022 show that more than 75% of PALM workers are employed in horticulture.<sup>8</sup> Currently there are more than 35,000 PALM workers in Australia.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, both visas are reliant on achieving a minimum number of hours or days of work to fulfil visa requirements. Although the WHMs are not mandated to undertake three-months of specified work in their first year, many desperately want to, as they intend to stay on and apply for a second- or third-year visa. Similarly, for PALM workers, any cancelled work due to poor weather conditions greatly impacts on their ability to save and send money home, let alone pay bills and loans they have in Australia.

## Weather disruptions affect visa time

My research has found that many businesses who either directly employ WHMs and/or PALM workers, or are providing daily services to farm workers (e.g. accommodation, transportation, etc.) are concerned about changing climate and increasing extreme weather events having profound impact on the migrant workers they employ, host, and support. While farmers may be familiar with unpredictable weather and seasonal climatic variability, those who are directly engaged in the international cohorts of WHMs and PALM workers pay closer attention to how cancelled work days impact their employees' livelihoods.

The ability to work (and, by extension, their remuneration, accommodation, and livelihoods) are directly influenced by the weather forecast. Heavy rain? No work today, and so no pay. Severe heat wave? This means a slower pace of work to complete daily tasks over a longer period of time. But for the WHM backpackers, who are incentivised to complete a minimum of three-months work in their first-year visa and six-months full-time work during their second-year, good weather and a stable climate really matters. For WHMs, who rely on getting each day's work “ticked off” towards their next year's visa application, a full working day really matters. Sent home after only an hour or two due to a storm rolling in? That is not a full day's pay, so it might not count as a day towards the visa application.

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4 WHM visas are eligible for ages 18-30, or up to 35 years for Italian, Danish, Irish, Canadian, and French nationals.

5 Dept. Home Affairs. 2022. *Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program*. Available at: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/whm-program/overview>

6 Dept. Home Affairs. *Working Holiday Maker visa report December 2022*. Available at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/working-holiday-report-dec-22.pdf>

7 PALM consolidates existing similar visas: the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme.

8 ABARES Horticulture Survey, June 2022. Available at: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour#horticulture-farm-labour-use>

9 DFAT: Pacific Labour Mobility. Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/pacific-labour-mobility>

Similarly, for the PALM workers, recent changes to the PALM scheme mean that, from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024, all PALM workers on a seasonal contract must be offered a minimum of 30 hours per week<sup>10</sup> – every week – across the nine-month period. Previously, this could be averaged out across a longer period, which allowed for seasonal variances and weather disruptions (meaning that some weeks could include fewer hours due to disruption, but these hours would be made up in future weeks). For instance, an Approved Employer in the Whitsundays said:

it's just not feasible. We use small family farms, so some weeks they may do 50 hours, the next week they need 100 hours, the following week it rains, so there's no work. But it averages out across the weeks. They're still getting paid. It allows for the continuity of the weather. If you don't give the farmer that leeway, well, no one can afford to pay somebody [workers] when they're sitting around not doing anything. (Interview, July 2023)

Another Approved Employer in Far North Queensland had similar concerns: "One cyclone comes through, and you'd be paying wages for people to sit around for weeks. There's no contingency built in". One grower described these forthcoming arrangements as "inflexible", in that "farming is all about weather. Let alone climate change". Similar comments were made by employers and accommodation providers about the variances in Queensland regions: "up in the tropics, it can rain for a month straight. What are we supposed to do then? Keep paying them for zero hours worked?" (Interview, August 2023). When the new arrangements come into effect next year, employers of PALM workers will take on a higher level of risk to potentially cover labour-related costs of the increased likelihood of lengthier and unpredictable weather conditions. While this is obviously good for workers to have more security in minimum weekly hours, it may mean that growers have to look elsewhere for workers, rather than this specific visa program.

### **Severe and unpredictable weather**

The elongated wet weather in 2022 saw many farming communities disrupted, as workers who received minimal or no hours were unable to cover their weekly rent and bills. This puts pressure on everyone involved, as the workers accommodation is often provided by approved facilities (under the PALM scheme), or contracted alongside a job (for WHMs), and so workers, employers, accommodation providers, and growers are all impacted from lack of finances coming in. While it is difficult to ascertain if unseasonable weather is a direct product of climate change, it is reasonable to assume with a warming climate that increased unseasonable weather conditions and severe events will continue. Interviews with farming communities reveal the uncertainty this creates for those who employ or host migrant workers. For instance, an accommodation provider in the Wide Bay region, who provides hostel accommodation for more than 100 PALM workers and backpackers, recounted a period of three-weeks of intense rainfall. He said:

It was really hard, we had about 60 [workers] whose work was cancelled. They usually work six or seven days a week at that time of year, but ... it's weather dependent... so, if they're not working, they're obviously not able to pay any rent. They still have to pay rent, but we had a week or two of solid rain, so we tried to reduce the rent, or put a hold on their rent to catch up later, when they do start working. We try to be as reasonable as we can, but... we have bills too. (Interview, May 2022).

A spokesperson for a Growers Association explained in an interview that weather variability:

is probably one of the main things that has held growers back from participating in the PALM scheme – the availability and continuity of work ... because it's very difficult for a grower to hand-on-heart say, "I will have this amount of work for fourth months or six months or more", when we know how vulnerable we are to weather impacts. ... (Interview, November 2022).

The health and safety of workers in extreme conditions was also a concern raised in interviews. Comments from local support and civic groups for more awareness and education related to weather and climate conditions for newly-arrived workers was mentioned in several interviews. A local police Sergeant in

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<sup>10</sup> Dept. Employment and Workplace Relations. *PALM Transition FAQs*. Available at: <https://www.dewr.gov.au/download/15487/palm-transition-fags-33638/palm-transition-fags/pdf>

Bundaberg explained that part of their role is to liaise with hostels and farms to educate international workers on safety, including safe driving in wet weather and avoiding flood waters. However, surprisingly, they reported that basic heat and sun exposure-related illness was a key concern in the community:

It's a different climate to what they're [the backpackers] are used to. Heat stress is a real issue. We've had backpackers die out on our fields. It's about education" (Interview, July 2022)

Another interview with a representative of a Growers Association echoed these comments:

Growers are really concerned about the workers' ability to adapt with our climate getting hotter ... it's making sure the workers are aware of the conditions and that the correct facilities have been provided for them ... but it has to be a widespread approach for educating international workers (Interview, November 2022).

### **Preparing for a growing migrant workforce**

The interview excerpts provided above indicate that farming communities are concerned about increased severe and unpredictable weather, and the impacts this will have on their ability to provide good, reliable, and safe jobs for migrant workers. Queensland's horticultural sector is highly dependent on the WHM and PALM visa programs, which are both geared towards guaranteeing hours to fulfil visa conditions. When weather disrupts regular patterns or work, employers are either required to cover labour costs during unseasonable weather, or to sit back and watch while low-paid workers try to survive these periods without any pay. Neither scenario is ideal, as both growers and workers suffer.

There are, however, insights that can assist farming communities to best support migrant workers while they are here in Queensland filling these essential jobs in horticulture:

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Further consultation with industry on building compensation, support packages, or insurances for migrant workers during periods of extreme weather events that disrupt or cancel work.**
- **Advocate to the Federal Government for adjustments to the WHM visa to account for days cancelled or interrupted due to weather events, so that these can count as specified workdays for second- and third-year visa applications; and similar concessions to be made for PALM specified weekly hours.**
- **Build educational and support services for all workers around severe weather, especially the health and safety during periods of intense heat.**

Should you require further information on the matters raised in this submission, please contact me via email or phone. I would be happy to provide further insight or information for this important and timely inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Kaya Barry

