




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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ADJOURNMENT

Agriculture Industry, Labour

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (7.24 pm): I thank the member for Macalister for sharing her story. Burnett's food bowl is facing a bleak future in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As if water security fears were not enough to send our farmers to breaking point, our agriculture industry is facing unprecedented challenges with significant workforce shortages due to a combination of limited international backpackers taking up picking and processing jobs thanks to COVID travel restrictions and a lack of interest from Australians willing to take up those vacant jobs. We know that backpackers, whom our farmers have relied on heavily historically, are leaving the country in droves. In fact, we are told that we are losing 1,000 backpackers a week as their visas are not being renewed.

Where does that leave us? The harsh reality is that without workers to harvest and process crops the crops will be left to rot on the ground and in the trees. That is having a devastating effect on growers and the economy. Some farmers are telling us that they are not going to bother planting this season; they would sooner let the ground stay fallow because they know their crops will not be picked. Who could blame them? Why would they throw their hard-earned dollars at a field just to watch their crops rot? No crops means no fresh food on our plates.

As we recover from the pandemic we desperately need one of our key industries to be running efficiently, but we are not backing the agriculture industry like we should be. I say this honestly: the federal government has a role to play and needs to step up, as all of us in this place need to do. We must work together on a common goal to ensure that this vital industry does not suffer because of a workforce shortage.

I point out that the state government has been throwing money at a failed back-to-work incentive. I say in all sincerity that people try these things, and I am not being critical, but when it was announced months ago across the whole state 80 people applied and in the Wide Bay only two took up the offer. Last week I found it incredibly frustrating when the minister announced the same scheme although rebranded through a fluffy campaign. Let us be clear: the campaign is short term, it is a bandaid fix and it does not work. Many, including stakeholders, have suggested investing that money. We need to work with the South Pacific islander program that is starting to roll out, which I welcome.

I want to put on the record that a Burnett based company, Young Sang & Co, believe that if they do not get support right now like many other producers they will not be operating in 12 months time. I will conclude with a plea straight from the local producer's general manager, Daniel Scavo, who describes the situation as 'heartbreaking'. He said—

If it stays like this, we're in dire straits. If there's any time to come and help us, it's now. We feed Australian people. We need help, so help us.

I call on the federal members of my area, the state minister and others to put all this aside and work together on COVID visas to keep the international backpackers here. Let us get the planes flying to bring the South Pacific islanders into the regions in more prolific numbers so that they can get the crops off the fields and save the economy.