

Question on Notice

No. 650

Asked on 25 May 2021

MR T SMITH ASKED MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT AND FISHERIES AND MINISTER FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES (HON M FURNER)—

QUESTION:

Will the Minister outline how the government is supporting the horticulture sector to thrive in the Wide Bay Burnett Region?

ANSWER:

The Wide Bay Burnett is a diverse region with a direct economic contribution of nearly \$850 million from fruit, nuts and vegetable producers. In addition, lifestyle horticulture contributes another \$150 million to the region. Horticulture supports nearly 350 fruit and nut enterprises and over 200 vegetable enterprises (2019-20 ABS). These businesses have a strong demand for seasonal workers, with average monthly labour demand across the region of approximately 3,500 workers. Significant efforts have been made to support horticulture in the region given its economic importance to the State.

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) is engaging in several projects covering a wide range of individual commodities to support horticulture development in the Wide Bay Burnett Region. Several breeding programs and trials are being undertaken in the region across macadamias, pineapples and strawberries, and these industries have been supported in adopting high density growing systems through field days and extension materials generated by DAF.

The DAF Australian Strawberry Breeding Program has supported the success of Queensland strawberry production including in the Wide Bay Burnett area. This project has released 11 strawberry varieties, which are 35-50 per cent more profitable than existing varieties.

The National Tree Crop Intensification in Horticulture project is trialling intensive production systems for macadamia at the Bundaberg Research Facility. This research aims to maximise tree potential and resource use efficiency to ultimately lift productivity and quality.

DAF is supporting the development of pineapple production through on-farm trials to develop fresh market varieties particularly suited to production in the Wide Bay-Bundaberg region.

Citrus and, in particular, mandarins are an important crop grown in the Wide Bay Burnett. DAF's breeding program, operating from its Bundaberg Research Facility, recently released low-seeded 'Premier Murcott' and 'CB Murcott' varieties which are suitable for export.

Considerable support has been provided to the local avocado industry. Regional forums are held each year for avocado growers and a two-day avocado growing skills course (AvoSkills) will be held on 3-4 August 2021 in the Wide Bay Burnett region, targeted at new growers, resellers and service providers.

To assist the Queensland citrus industry to realise export growth opportunities, the Queensland Citrus Exporters' Group (QCEG) was formed in April 2015 in the Bundaberg region. QCEG helps members to be competitive in a global market by providing market intelligence and

relationships that promote market growth and diversification. QCEG members are experiencing significant growth in key markets like Thailand and China because of targeted promotion activities and grower developed export quality standards. The group works in partnership with Citrus Australia and other supply chain partners to improve the competitiveness of Queensland mandarin citrus in export markets and meets regularly throughout the harvest season.

The closure of international borders as a result of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused a shortfall of workers in the agriculture sector. To support the industry at this difficult time, the Queensland Government agreed to be part of the recommencement of the Federal Government's Pacific Labour Scheme and Seasonal Worker Programme (PLS/SWP).

In relation to the Wide Bay Burnett region, as at June 2021 the PLS/SWP has been successful in bringing in 650 workers. This includes 342 workers who are working on citrus producing properties, 36 working on banana farms, 36 on farms producing vegetables and 77 who are working on properties producing other types of fruit. The balance of workers (159) are employed in the livestock sector and, while this is not horticulture, their efforts remain important to the operation of that sector and the local economy.

The Queensland Agriculture Workers Network (QAWN) is a Queensland Government funded, industry-led initiative that is working to address agriculture's labour and skill needs. One example of its efforts includes the 'School Holiday Job Program' which is designed to provide students with the skills and experience required for job applications and participating in job interviews, that has been developed in collaboration with Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers, Bundaberg Canegrowers, regional Horticulture employers and local State Schools.

With assistance from the Queensland Government, a new AgTech hub located at Bargara has unlocked the enormous potential of agricultural technology and made it available to the region's farmers. The hub is home to highly skilled professionals with expertise in research, testing, technology and data analysis.

On 16 June 2020, the Queensland Government announced the \$2 million agribusiness diversification initiative to build capability and explore potential diversification opportunities through agritourism to support agribusiness recovery from COVID-19. The 'Taste farm life' campaign has encouraged visitors and tourists to experience what farms have to offer and highlights some of the opportunities available in the Bundaberg region.