

Question on Notice

No. 95

Asked on 25 February 2021

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

QUESTION:

With reference to labour on Queensland farms— Will the Minister outline (a) what modelling has been completed by the department on the number of workers needed in the 2021 seasons to accommodate industry demand, (b) the shortfall per region of workers on demand versus supply in 2021 per season, (c) how many workers have been delivered on farm through the government's (i) \$1.1m agricultural seasonal labour initiative originally announced in September 2020 and (ii) \$700,000 Back to Work in Agriculture Incentive Scheme pilot commenced in October 2020?

ANSWER:

From the outset of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) has been working with industry and government agencies to analyse labour availability. Attracting and training Queenslanders to work in the agribusiness and food sector also continues to be the Palaszczuk Government's focus for meeting the forecast labour shortage. Queensland is also participating in the Seasonal Worker Programme/Pacific Labour Scheme (SWP/PLS) that has facilitated the entry of close to 1,000 seasonal workers at this point.

Part (a) - The initial modelling, with industry input, focussed on Queensland horticulture labour demand and supply from August 2020 to July 2021. The latest modelling indicates that shortages are likely to be felt across all major horticulture growing regions in line with their peak harvest periods. DAF forecasts a labour shortage from May to October 2021, with a peak shortage of up to 9,000 FTEs in July 2021. The modelling assumes that a gradual re-opening of travel will occur from early 2022 and will not reach pre-COVID-19 levels until 2023. This shortage could be reduced through the expanded SWP/PLS and further uptake by industry and the broader community of government initiatives that are underway.

Part (b) - It is difficult to model labour shortages at the regional level as the effects are not homogeneous and can be influenced by other factors, not just location. Impacts to businesses are dependent on many factors including the type of commodity or commodities grown; the length of harvest season; the ability to shift production; labour intensity; profit margins; and ability to incentivise labour and business planning.

Part (c) - The \$1.1 million agricultural seasonal labour initiative includes the #PickQld campaign; additional funding for the Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN) to develop local workforce solutions; and the Back to Work in Agriculture Incentive Scheme.

The #PickQld campaign page has attracted over 90,000 unique views and helped connect seasonal workers, including grey nomads, displaced Queensland workers and working holiday makers, to employment opportunities to help Queensland producers.

The industry-based QAWN officers were provided with \$350,000 to develop and progress local workforce solutions with local stakeholders, industry and regional leaders. This funding is helping connect people who are traditionally not considered by producers for seasonal work;

providing training and pre-induction programs for new entrants; and improving the workforce attraction and recruitment skills within agribusinesses. Examples include:

- coordinated placement of migrant workers and asylum seekers in conjunction with support agencies;
- working with at-risk youth to identify opportunities for work experience and exposure to farming;
- provision of pre-induction training for school students, school leavers and other potential new entrants to make them farm work ready; and
- connecting university students and graduates to employment opportunities.

DAF also provided \$50,000 for a pilot program to attract unemployed refugees, international students and temporary visa holders into seasonal agriculture work. Multicultural Australia received over 350 expressions of interest. After initial screening, 143 people were shortlisted and referred to a licensed labour hire company and to participating employers. To date, 35 placements have been made and the pilot has identified farming companies willing to work directly with Multicultural Australia.

As at 9 March 2021, 150 people had commenced applications for the Back to Work in Agriculture Incentive Scheme and a further 84 applications had been formally submitted for assessment. DAF is working with industry bodies to ensure potential employees are aware of the incentive, and to encourage employers to highlight this assistance when recruiting people who are new to agricultural work. This scheme is still open to applications and I encourage Queenslanders to visit the DAF website for more information.