

Question on Notice

No. 822

Asked on 18 August 2022

MR S BENNETT ASKED MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, MINISTER FOR INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND MINISTER FOR RACING (HON G GRACE)

QUESTION:

Will the Minister advise what actions are being taken to protect the financial, physical, and mental wellbeing of vulnerable backpackers and seasonal farm workers in Queensland considering the recent alleged exploitation of South Sea Islander workers in the Bundaberg region?

ANSWER:

The Palaszczuk Government is committed to ensuring the rights and entitlements of workers are protected.

The Government has undertaken significant reforms since 2015 in a wide range of areas impacting workers in Queensland, such as introducing a labour hire licensing scheme, improvements to workers' compensation laws, enacting industrial manslaughter laws and criminalising wage theft.

The Labour Hire Licensing Compliance Unit (the Compliance Unit) administers the labour hire licensing scheme. Since the inception of the scheme, horticulture has been a key priority industry with the following significant actions taken in the horticultural sector:

- 11 successful prosecutions for breaches of the *Labour Hire Licensing Act 2017* against labour hire providers and others, resulting in fines of \$755,000 ordered;
- 21 labour hire licences cancelled for non-compliance;
- 33 labour hire licences suspended for non-compliance;
- 236 applications for labour hire licences refused or withdrawn following compliance actions commenced;
- 95 labour hire licences granted with conditions imposed to enable close monitoring and ensure ongoing compliance of the licensee; and
- 819 audits, investigations and complaints were conducted during 2021–22 across all industries, including in the horticultural sector.

The Compliance Unit has also been successful in influencing and working with labour hire providers to remedy breaches voluntarily. The Compliance Unit works closely with a range of local, state and federal agencies, including the Australian Border Force, the Fair Work Ombudsman, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ) and WorkCover Queensland authorities, to ensure the integrity of the labour hire licensing scheme in Queensland and protect vulnerable workers from exploitation.

The Compliance Unit regularly attends the Working Tourist Safety Forum in Bundaberg, organised by the Queensland Police Service (QPS), with a group of dedicated stakeholders who together with QPS help ensure the safety of working tourists, seasonal workers, and backpackers in the Bundaberg region. Stakeholders include hostel owners; farms employing backpackers; Bundaberg fruit and vegetable growers; and representatives from local, state and federal government agencies. During June and July 2022, inspectors from the Compliance Unit have visited Bundaberg to conduct farm and accommodation visits and have met with labour hire providers and a range of relevant stakeholders.

WHSQ has a dedicated Agriculture Compliance Unit tasked with educating and regulating duty holders to ensure compliance with obligations under work health and safety laws in Queensland. WHSQ also works in collaboration with a number of organisations to determine key challenges and issues in delivering workplace mental health services throughout Queensland, and engages with representatives from industry and union groups in the Rural Industry Sector Standing Committee to promote and raise awareness about psychological health and safety in the Agriculture industry.

The Agriculture Compliance Unit recently conducted a planned intervention targeting macadamia growers in the greater Bundaberg region, which focused on a range of prominent health and safety issues in the workplace. Over 35 statutory notices were issued during this audit, addressing issues ranging from plant guarding, first aid, hazardous chemicals to unsafe work environments.

WHSQ has undertaken 45 workplace and accommodation inspections in the Bundaberg region in support of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, which focused on priority areas of electrical safety, traffic management, high risk licensing, hazardous chemicals and plant guarding across worksites and accommodation provided for workers in the region.