

The Hon David Littleproud
Minister for Agriculture, Drought, and Emergency Management
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister Littleproud

I am writing on behalf of Protected Cropping Australia to express our grave concerns at the impacts COVID-19 quarantine restrictions will have on the workforce available to our sector, and the inevitable flow-on effects this will have on the supply of fruit and vegetables to Australian consumers.

Protected Cropping Australia (PCA) is the peak industry body representing commercial hydroponic and greenhouse growers Australia wide. PCA members also include equipment and installation suppliers, specialist consultants and advisors, researchers and educators.

The protected cropping industry is the fastest growing food-producing sector in Australia, with annual growth rates averaging more than 60% over the past five years.

In 2017/18, it was valued at around \$1.5 billion (\$1,589 million) per annum at the farm gate, up from \$486 million in 2014. This is equivalent to around 15% of the total value of vegetable and cut flower production in Australia (RIRDC report HSA-9A). However, anecdotally, it is understood that around 30% of all Australian farmers now grow crops in some form of soil-less or protected cropping system.

It is estimated that more than 10,000 people are currently employed directly in protected cropping throughout Australia, with labour requirements for the industry expanding at more than 5% per annum. As a result of the fact that produce is grown all year round in protected cropping systems there is less seasonality in our workforce requirements, meaning there is high demand for harvest labour year-round. Much of this demand is filled by backpackers and temporary foreign seasonal workers.

We understand and appreciate the intent behind the quarantine restrictions on these workforce cohorts recently announced by your government to slow the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19).

However, it is clear that these measures will have unintentional consequences for our sector, impeding our ability to continue to supply fresh fruit and vegetables for all Australians. Furthermore, this will seriously impact on local employment opportunities and communities at a time when many growers are recovering from severe weather conditions and the recent devastating bushfires.



We therefore urge you to support the requests from the broader horticulture industry to:

- Exempt workers coming to Australia under the Seasonal Worker Program and/or Pacific Labour Facility from the Pacific islands and Timor Leste from the quarantine requirement – as has already been announced by the New Zealand government;
- Extend visas for workers under the Seasonal Worker Program, Pacific Labour Facility and backpackers where they continue to work in agriculture;
- Provide additional resourcing for the department's Seasonal Worker Program Branch in order to support timely approval of applications, extensions, and process requests for portability; and
- Provide clarification with respect to self-isolation requirements for the fresh produce workforce.

We're not looking for handouts. These are all measures which are within the government's control and which can be implemented with only minor increases in operational costs.

Your positive consideration of these requests would enable our industry to continue our important contribution to the well-being of all Australians. Not only will we be able to keep up the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables to Australian consumers, we will continue to employ more people which will drive economic activity in regional communities during what will be a time of serious stress for everyone.

Yours sincerely



Nicky Mann

President

19th March 2020

Cc *Michael McCormack MP, Deputy PM and Minister for Regional Development*
David Coleman MP, Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs
Senator Simon Birmingham, Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment
Michaelia Cash MP, Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business