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Labour webinar offers hope to growers

Face-to-face events continue to be replaced by online webinars to keep information flowing. Recently PMA Australia + New Zealand looked at labour hire issues, which are impacting on the 2020-2021 harvest for growers.

The webinar, 'Labour in Horticulture Update and Outlook', held in early November via Zoom, was moderated by Darren Keating, CEO, PMA ANZ, with guest speakers Michael Rogers, CEO Australian Fresh Produce Alliance, and Brooke Lord, Head of Advocacy, RCSA. The focus was ways to assure labour is available for fruit harvesting, which is ramping up around Australia.

Against the background of a diminishing workforce as backpackers continue to head home and new labour struggles to enter the country, Michael Rogers outlined the current picture around working visas. "Normally 14,000 visas are granted each year but currently just 6400 workers remain in Australia with only small numbers coming in," explained Michael.

Michael was also keen to flag that labour shortages will not diminish after this summer but will not be met through 2021 and potentially beyond due to restrictions on overseas travel.

"We need immediate solutions and solutions for the next 12 to 18 months as well," he explained. "The longer COVID restrictions play out, the longer the recovery."

Brooke Lord said that hard borders have been a monstrous headache for labour in all industries and called for greater cohesion.

"The lack of unity means seven conversations not one," she said. "Government is aware of the challenge but there isn't a ready-made solution and policies including Jobkeeper and Jobseeker are keeping people close to the city so they are on hand if their old roles return."

"While there is increased interest from Australians in harvest work, the reality is that harvest opportunities are often a long way away from capital cities



Darren Keating, CEO of industry group PMA ANZ, moderated a recent webinar on dealing with labour shortages in horticulture. Photo Mark Gambino



Pickers in a strawberry tunnel. Labour to harvest berry crops is hard to find this summer due to the pandemic. Photo Adobe Stock Photos

where unemployed people are," said Michael.

Moderator, Darren Keating, noted that anecdotally growers are reporting a strong response to the call for fruit pickers with job applications received but that they are leading to very few boots on the ground.

"It is a challenge for us is to avoid the simplistic solutions of throwing unemployed at distant picking opportunities," he said. "Government has been engaged and listening at various levels and there have been some moves for example the extension of existing visas."

He also noted the restarting of the seasonal worker program but called on all governments to implement support packages to encourage workers to join the program.

"Most states have implemented support and now the Feds have a relocation package," he acknowledged. "There have been a number of actions but they haven't fixed the problem; a state-by-state approach is difficult for industry as it is operating in a national framework."

Brooke noted that there were more incentives now available for workers including bonuses, improved conditions and new ways of packaging jobs along with a raft of government incentives.

Some industry groups have also been instrumental in bringing labour into Australia by arranging visas and charter flights from Timor-Leste and the Pacific Islands.

Michael added that it was important to look at individual tasks and ways of making those

tasks more attractive but also more effective so there's less downtime.

"Encourage greater efficiencies," he urged. "In difficult times it is good to reconsider the traditional and make sure workers are trained, supported, equipped and properly remunerated; it is not just about paying more."

He also confirmed that plans are in train for a dedicated harvest visa if it looks like current labour shortages are going to lead to food shortages on the supermarket shelves.

Skilled or unskilled

The webinar also examined the terminology around 'skilled' and 'unskilled' labour following a question to the presenters pointing out that, although seasonal workers are often referred to as unskilled labour, they are often highly skilled due to their extensive experience.

Michael agreed saying that while the labour was often unqualified, most repeat workers are skilled due to their experience, that they understand and like the work, and are highly productive.

"It is not about educational skill," he explained. "We need a work-ready, supported workforce that will keep coming back."

He encouraged all businesses to be proactive in their labour hire and to plan early. He also encouraged individuals to contact their state and federal government representatives about their key concerns and to offer solutions.



VegNET program targets Vietnamese growers

Vietnamese growers enjoying farms tours as part of a training scheme. In all, 20 growers took part in the farm tours.

Workshops, training and on-farm visits have changed practices and brought benefits to growers from Greater Sydney's Vietnamese community. Matthew Plunkett presents a case study on a recent VegNET program in New South Wales.

Vietnamese growers in the Greater Sydney area are part of a grower group from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (CALD). Many started farming operations in the early 1980s when Asian vegetables were becoming more popular in Australia. The majority of their farms are small (2-4ha) and most do not own their land. Most lease land, often for a relatively short term. Their experience in farming ranges from only a few years to more than 30. With many

experienced growers retiring from farming in the next few years and their children showing little to no interest in continuing their parents' businesses, new entrants have little farming background or experience before immigrating to Australia.

Prior to arriving in Australia, these growers were often employed in trade or process work in Vietnam and did not have any farming experience. They learned basic greenhouse vegetable and herb production from friends or other CALD groups in the region such as the well-established growers and technical advisers with an Arabic-speaking background. Many of the Arabic-speaking background growers now lease their farms to Vietnamese and other growers from CALD background such as the Cambodian Growing Community.

Much of their learning has been a case of trial and error and, because this group of growers

tends to rent greenhouses from landholders, there is little motivation to invest in improving infrastructure. Consequently, the VegNET project focussed on improving knowledge for new farmers in basic technology, which requires minor investment, and improving skills in 'low' to 'medium tech' greenhouse production. Fertigation, irrigation and pest management learning areas were identified as skills most needed by these growers.

Training began in 2017, aimed at the immediate needs of new growers and to promote basic best practices. The aim was to deliver benefits to the growers without needing much financial farm investment. Bringing in an agriculturally experienced Vietnamese translator, Ho Dang, helped engage growers and build relationships between the New South Wales VegNET team and the community. Mentorships have also developed over this period of engagement.

“ONCE GROWERS GAINED EXPERIENCE AND ADOPTED BEST PRACTICE, THEY COULD SEE POSITIVE BENEFITS...”

Greenhouse DOWN

Nicky Mann shares the experience of closing down an established family growing business and the downside of removing the infrastructure. Her insights could make a tough situation more bearable.

As growers in protected cropping we are frequently maintaining and repairing old structures. Sometimes, if times are good or the banks are lending, we can upgrade what we have to build bigger and better ones.

Those times when we are rebuilding or refurbishing are always exciting and invigorating especially when a new tunnel, greenhouse or glasshouse rises out of the ground shiny and new.

However, we don't often see the dark and ugly side of pulling down and disposing of greenhouses and all their internal infrastructure that comes with the closing down of protected cropping businesses. I can tell you from first-hand experience that this is a depressing, horrible and expensive experience.

At the beginning

The entire Mann family – that's me, Wade and our family of three children – arrived on the Central Coast of New South Wales in December 2002 having migrated from Zimbabwe. We began leasing a 3000m², seven-year-old, ex-tomato, twin-skin, poly-greenhouse at Warnervale. The external structure was in fairly good condition but everything inside needed work and modification before we could start to plant hydroponic, fresh-cut roses, which we grew in old polystyrene broccoli boxes filled with cocopeat.



Nicky and Wade Mann faced a daunting task as they started to demolish a growing area on a rented site.