

Industry survey offers snapshot of growers' labour needs

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It became clear in March 2020 that the global impact of COVID-19 will affect Tasmania's fruit industries. In preparation, Fruit Growers Tasmania (FGT) went out to Tasmania's fruit growers in early June to get a measure of industry labour needs for each sector during the 2020-21 financial year period. Within the survey, participants were asked to indicate their industry sector(s) and a small number of questions relating to expected seasonal employee numbers, seasonal employee housing practices and ongoing employment within each sector.

A total of 77 respondents answered the labour survey, representing major growers in the strawberry, blueberry, raspberry, and blackberry industries, as well as other crops including cherries, apricots, nectarines, peaches, plums, apples, pears and quinces. Survey respondents indicated that their businesses employ 1358 people in ongoing roles.

Approximately 65% of individuals working in these sectors are employed as casual employees (876), with the remaining 35% permanently employed in either full time (440) or part time (42) roles.

Berries were shown to be the largest employment provider across the state, employing more than 700 Tasmanian persons to fill ongoing roles. These individuals were primarily located in the north (233) and northwest (385) of the state, with fewer located in the south (95).

Demand for seasonal labour

Most survey respondents (95%) indicated that their business is reliant upon access to seasonal labour to complete key activities. Responses from survey participants indicated a very high reliance on seasonal workers across the fruit industries, with a slightly smaller reliance amongst berry producers (89%) when compared against other fruit crops (98%). These trends reflect the growing number of small-scale pick-your-own berry enterprises now operating across the state.

In peak season, Tasmania's fruit sectors are reliant on almost 7,900 seasonal workers from interstate and overseas to fill seasonal roles, with only 2,900 of these filled by Australian residents and international students. By sector, the berry sector is the single largest employer of seasonal workers within Tasmania, employing more than 4,100 seasonal workers in peak season (Figure 1).

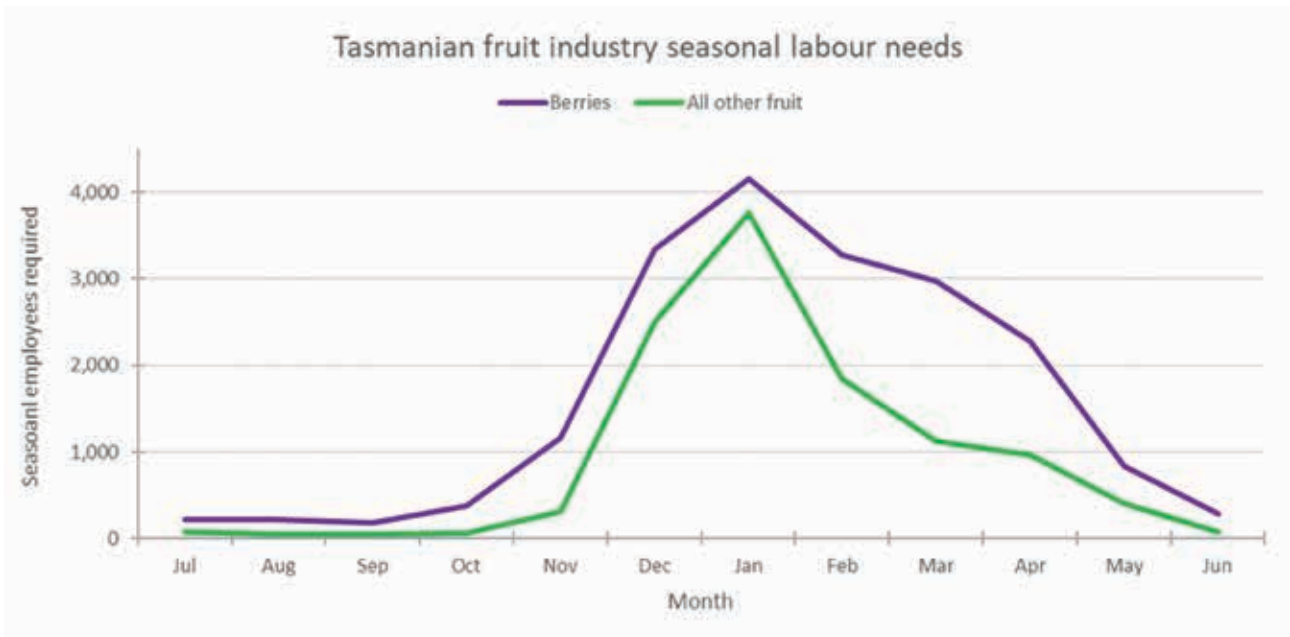


Figure 1. Tasmanian fruit industry seasonal labour needs comparison between berry sector and other non-berry fruit sectors. Note the higher labour requirement in peak season and longer duration for which employees are needed.

This sector utilises seasonal labour from a number of sources including locals and residents (941), working holiday makers (1,423), and the Pacific Islands (1,367) through the Pacific Labour Scheme and/or Seasonal Worker Program (Figure 2). International students were a negligible component of the berry sector’s seasonal workforce outside of the January peak (414). These employment demographics are very different from other Tasmanian fruit sectors (Figure 3), who rely heavily on working holiday makers (1,991), with international students (540) and locals and Australian residents (1,076) to manage their comparatively compact harvest windows.

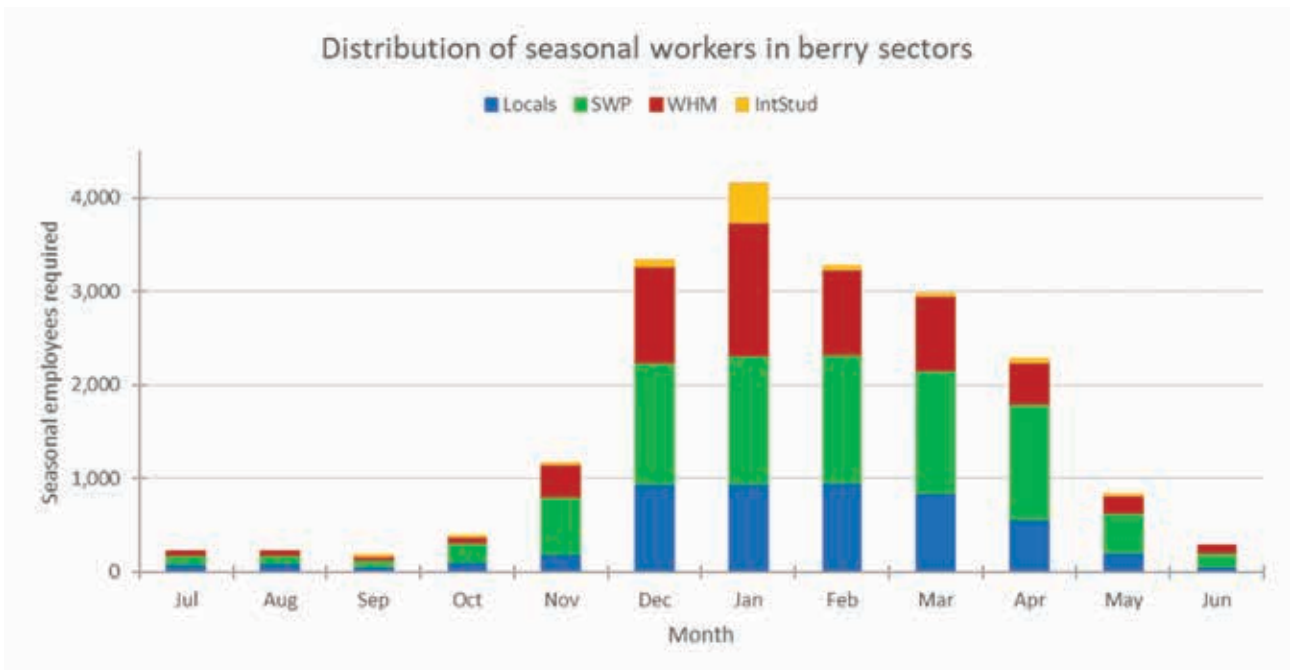


Figure 2. Distribution of number and type of seasonal workers in the berry industry. Seasonal workforce is required in large numbers fairly consistently throughout October to May.

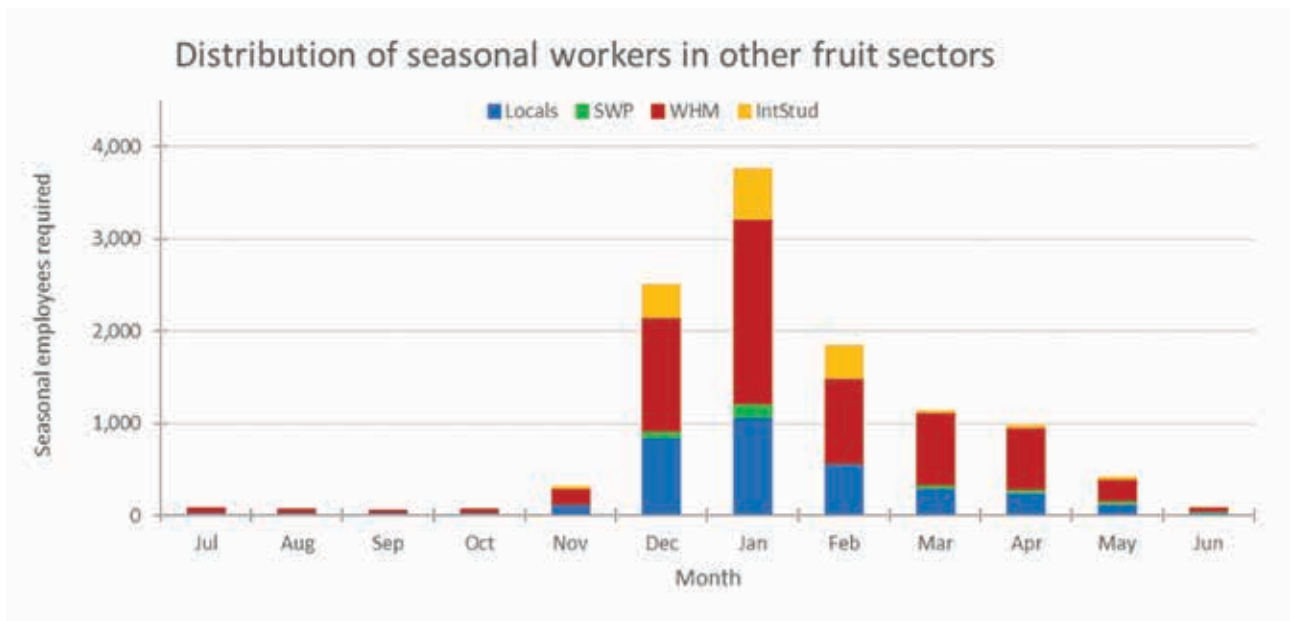


Figure 3. Distribution of number and type of seasonal workers in the other non-berry fruit industries. Seasonal workforce is required from November (apple thinning) to March (apple harvest) with a distinct peak in January (cherry harvest)

Tasmania’s border barrier

As outlined above, the majority of seasonal workers working in Tasmania’s fruit industries are attracted and sourced from interstate (working holiday makers) or from the Pacific Islands (Pacific Labour Scheme and/or Seasonal Worker Programs).

At the time of writing, all harvest workers entering Tasmania will be required to undergo a quarantine period of 14 days within a facility managed by the Tasmanian government immediately upon entering the state. Like other states, Tasmania’s quarantine facilities operate on a cost-recovery model which requires individuals to register and contribute \$2,800 per person prior to entry.

The Tasmanian government recently announced that these requirements would remain in place until at least 1 December 2020, with the option of this being further extended if problems persist in other areas of the country.

For employers using the Seasonal Worker Program, this announcement means the restrictions will be in effect during the first month or two of the harvest season when seasonal workers would traditionally be arriving in the state. This will make bringing these workers into the state difficult and expensive.

At this time, FGT are working with the Tasmanian government to explore a range of options in this area, but at this stage no decision has been reached.

The situation is similarly concerning for businesses relying on working holiday makers to fill seasonal work opportunities. Few working holiday makers remain located within Tasmania, and the financial and time costs of undergoing Tasmania’s quarantine are expected to deter potential new arrivals until quarantine restrictions are lifted.

This means few working holiday makers are expected to be present for the start of the Tasmanian berry harvest season, and more will not be forthcoming until early December at the earliest unless employers agree to absorb the quarantine costs for bringing in interstate workers.

Looking local for labour

Due to the challenges of bringing in seasonal workers from overseas or interstate, Tasmanian businesses are increasingly being encouraged to look locally to meet their seasonal labour needs.

To support this, the Tasmanian government is already announcing a number of new initiatives aimed at making people aware of seasonal work opportunities

and encouraging Tasmanians who have not previously done so to consider helping with the harvest.

FGT's labour survey shows that Tasmanian fruit producers source a significant part of their seasonal labour force locally, either through Australian residents or from international students during their holiday periods.

Looking locally may address issues of border quarantine requirements, but is expected to create a number of challenges for individual businesses and industries.

The first challenge for this season will be to grow the number of available seasonal workers from 2,900 to the 7,900 required by January.

Recognising this, a number of leading Tasmanian fruit producers are already stepping up efforts to attract and recruit more Tasmanians to take part in the harvest, including new migrants, domestic and international students, as well as those whose employment has been disrupted by COVID-19.

The second challenge for businesses will be to match the volume and timing of work to their likely available workforce. Growers in some sectors have acknowledged that they cannot afford to produce fruit which they cannot pick, pack and sell, resulting in them considering options like reducing planting areas, managing crop loads, and maximising fruit quality and pack-out rates.

Other businesses have taken the step to collaborate with nearby businesses in allied industries, moving workers between businesses to ensure work continuity.

The third challenge will be to retain workers for the duration of the harvest season. Without access to a professional itinerant workforce, it may be a difficult season to replace departing workers.

As noted in Figure 1, the seasonal work window for Tasmania's berry sector lasts for eight months, which is much longer than the 2-3 months of other crops, like cherries.

With such a long season, staff turnover and recruitment of replacement workers will be extra challenges for businesses in the berry sector.

Businesses may also wish to investigate options for bringing in and supporting seasonal workers from other areas of the state, including subsidised or free onsite accommodation and/or transport access for a lower pay rate. These measures may make it possible to draw upon willing workers from out-of-the-area locations within Tasmania.



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