

Seasonal Worker Program: a winning formula for industry

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The Australian Government's Seasonal Worker Program assists employers in the agriculture and accommodation sectors to fill employment gaps unable to be met by the Australian workforce. It also contributes to the economic development of seasonal workers from nine participating Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste including Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

The program offers a win-win for both parties. Employers get access to seasonal workers for up to nine months and those workers can return to the same roles in following seasons providing employers with a reliable, returning workforce. For the workers, the program provides access to work opportunities in Australia whilst contributing to the economic development of the eligible Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste.

Is there a labour market test requirement for this program?

Yes. Before seeking access to workers under the Seasonal Worker Program, approved employers must first try to recruit local job seekers by undertaking labour market testing. The Seasonal Worker Program has an 'Australian job seeker first' approach, and employers must advertise vacancies and give first preference to any suitable Australian job seekers before filling the vacancies with overseas seasonal workers.

What is required of an approved employer in this program?

As the employer of seasonal workers, approved employers are responsible for organising flights, transport and accommodation for workers, pastoral care, ensuring seasonal workers have access to a minimum average of 30 hours of work per week and monitoring the seasonal workers' wellbeing. Approved employers also have reporting obligations to the Australian Government, such as providing evidence that workers have been employed and paid in accordance with the program and Australian workplace entitlements.

The process to become an approved employer usually takes between three to four months to complete. An employer cannot recruit or commence recruitment under the Seasonal Worker Program until they have met all of the above conditions and submitted a recruitment plan that has been approved by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment.



Simon Dornauf from Hillwood Berries in Tasmania's north is a strong advocate for the Seasonal Worker Program. His business has been participating in the program since it began in 2012. Having a reliable workforce has allowed the Dornauf family to make expansion decisions within the business as they know that there is a reliable workforce available to pick the crop. Before being involved with the program, securing reliable labour had been very difficult for the business due to lack of local interest in farm work and a yearly turnover of working holiday visa holders.

"The Seasonal Worker Program is a real asset to the Tasmanian berry industry. Being tucked away on an island with limited winter work opportunities, it is often difficult to get a long-term workforce to cater for a seven-month berry season."

"It is such a good fit for Tasmanian berry growers. Under the program, employers are obliged to provide a minimum of 6 months' work to a seasonal worker employee so it is a win-win for job security and the investment in training by the business."

Recruiting the right seasonal workers

Representatives from Hillwood Berries make the trip overseas each year to carry out the recruitment process in person; Simon himself has now been to Tonga three times.

"The first year we decided to recruit from the program, we travelled to Tonga to meet each employee and their families. I think taking the time to travel over to their home countries, meet their families and appreciate their way of life helped initiate a friendly and respectful relationship."

"The Seasonal Worker Program has strengthened the business and provided opportunities to families overseas. Of the original employees we brought in at the start of this journey, seven are still with us. Some of those employees have returned with their brother, sister, wife or close friend which has allowed us to expand our recruitment with some reassurance of who is coming to work on our farm. These return employees require little training in subsequent years and are fully-skilled competent workers."

"It's rewarding to see where the money is spent. It might be a family car, educating their children, feeding their extended family or building a house and seeing the foundation one year and the walls and roof up the next."

Creating jobs for locals

Today, Hillwood Berries employs 282 seasonal workers from a variety of nations, with many workers coming from Timor-Leste and Tonga. For every five seasonal workers, Hillwood Berries employs another one local full-time person; whether it be providing cooked meals to the workforce, farm agronomists and harvest co-ordinators to now employing a full-time mechanic to service the bus fleet.

Hillwood Berries provides approved Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) accommodation and transport to and from the farm. Dinner and breakfast are cooked daily by an on-farm chef, and in the current COVID-climate the business also supplies lunch to minimise travel of employees off-site.

"Over the last five years with the Seasonal Worker Program we have expanded our business and staff. It's required a little more planning each year to smooth out labour requirements, which means diversifying into other berry types, varietal selection and optimising long cane production. But the employees supporting me are reliable, skilled and willing; so, it's really no compromise at all."



Seasonal Worker Program participants working at Hillwood Berries. Photo credit: Melanie Kate Photography

Helping growers access the program

MADEC is a nationally registered training organisation (RTO), manages the National Harvest Labour Information Service (NHLIS), harvest labour services (sourcing and placing more 15,000 jobs in horticulture across Australia), provides *jobactive* services under a commonwealth government contract and is an approved employer under the Seasonal Worker Program. MADEC Australia is a successful not-for-profit and charitable organisation, with a 50-year history of providing relief to people experiencing poverty or distress.

MADEC Australia is able to assist in many ways including:

- conducting labour market testing,
- recruiting seasonal workers, ready to start work at a pre-determined date,
- covering upfront costs including the workers international travel and visas,
- sourcing suitable accommodation for the duration of the workers stay in Australia,
- arranging transportation to the workplace,
- paying workers the award rate,
- managing superannuation, tax and workover obligations,
- conducting an on-arrival briefing for the workers,
- providing 24/7 phone contact and support,
- assisting with worker performance management and behavioural issues should they arise,
- undertaking a post-season review, and
- commencing arrangements for workers to return in the following season.

Paradise Fruit at Elimbah in south-east Queensland produces raspberries and blueberries and was established in 1996. They have partnered with MADEC over the last three years to employ more than 50 staff members under the Seasonal Worker Program. The partnership with MADEC provides 50% of their labour requirements with the remaining workforce made up of locals and Working Holiday Visa holders (backpackers).

“We have mostly married men working with us and the MADEC process of recruitment means they have a really good work ethic. The workers are paid through an appropriate piece rate agreement and many work hard to ensure that their families back home are well supported” said Paul Dydula, Managing Director of Paradise Fruit.

Most of the seasonal workers are housed locally in Caboolture; however, it can be difficult to find suitable accommodation that meets the required standards. Sourcing short term lease agreements for non-Australian residents can prove a challenge.

MADEC and Paradise Fruits have worked together to source appropriate options which has required modifications to be made to existing accommodation to meet the appropriate standards.

“It’s not all roses though” said Paul, accommodation requirements are required to be finalised 8 weeks prior to the arrival of the workers, which means paying rent for no purpose for up to three months.”

Michael Wallis, MADEC Account Manager SEQ, said “the value that MADEC offers is in the administrative and management aspects of the partnership. The initial recruitment we conducted with Paradise Fruit over three years ago has been successful for both the seasonal workers themselves and Paradise Fruit, and it is great to see the same employees returning to the farm each period. If we can continue to access suitable accommodation, this will definitely be a viable solution in meeting labour and workforce requirements in the berry industries in the future”.



Seasonal Worker Program participants with Brett O’Neill Farm Manager at Paradise Fruit and Michael Wallis MADEC Account Manager for SE Queensland.

Photo credit: Bron Ford

For further information on the Seasonal Workers Program contact Michael Wallis – Mwallis@madec.com.au or visit www.madec.edu.au