

Dragon fruit farm, Middle Point, NT (Geoff Whalan/Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Helping the Seasonal Worker Program reach its potential in the NT

By Development Policy Centre
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It's fair to say the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) struggled to get off the ground. However, recent growth of 40 per cent in 2014-15 and 2015-16 is a big positive, allowing more Pacific citizens to come and work in Australia to earn much higher incomes than are possible in their home countries.

As the SWP continues to grow, there are interesting initiatives taking place across the country. One of these is a government-funded position in the Northern Territory within an industry association to better engage with potential employers.

Aisla Connolly is the Workforce Planning Coordinator of the Seasonal Worker Program Pilot Project, working for [NT Farmers](#). Over the past months, Aisla has been promoting the SWP and investigating why the program is not being used to a greater extent. Devpolicy recently sat down with Aisla and asked her a few questions.

What is the opportunity for the SWP in the Northern Territory?

Aisla: A returning workforce is something that would save employers time and money in training every year, sometimes many times due to workers leaving throughout the season. For example, in 2015 the NT Horticulture industry had 3900 positions which 6000 people filled due to the workers moving on during the season.

The Northern Territory also has a couple of advantages. Many workers from tropical islands are already acclimatised to the tropical weather in the Top End compared to many other migrants who come from Europe and Asia. In addition, the proximity to Timor-Leste makes the cost of getting workers from their home country to Darwin and the rest of the Northern Territory quite reasonable.

What has been the most common piece of feedback from NT farmers about the SWP?

The lack of labour is the biggest issue. The population is low in the Northern Territory, especially in regional areas outside Darwin. If employers here in the Northern Territory, particularly farmers and tourism operators, had better access to labour, many would be able

to expand their businesses.

With regard to the Seasonal Worker Program, many employers raise the administrative burden. There is a lot of administration and different criteria to meet. My role, being the Workforce Planning Coordinator, is part of the answer by assisting with the administration requirements.

The inflexibility of the program is now the biggest issue. For example, the requirement of arranging international air transport and having to purchase a pre-dated return ticket can result in extra costs. Farmers cannot predict the end of the harvest with such certainty given the weather and other delays.

You recently held an event discussing the Seasonal Worker Program with NT Farmers and employers. How did that go? Was there consensus on how to move forward and attract more workers?

On February 22, Top End Farmers travelled to Katherine where we held a forum with the Farmers there. Information was shared between farmers; those who have experience with the program, some for up to 4 years, and those who have not. It was excellent to get 23 farmers in the room, to identify the benefits and challenges along with practical solutions. The main consensus was that the benefits of the SWP outweigh the costs but much more work is required to make the program more effective. For example, dealing with multiple government departments was noted as well as the waiting periods for the Department of Employment at the application stage. Some commented that to use the SWP, labour market testing was required which was a burden. Labour market testing isn't needed to employ backpackers, for example.

Attracting workers through the SWP is not an issue as there are many Timorese and Pacific Islanders willing, ready and able to come to work in the Northern Territory.

Some farmers present complained about inconsistent and lengthy response times, therefore an improvement in processing times is required. Others suggested a trust fund for return airfare guarantees or cheaper flexible fares should be considered.

Do you have any other comments to add?

The hospitality industry have not taken up the SWP to date, with the inability to meet the accommodation requirement being one of their major issues. There is a lack of accommodation in areas of the NT during seasonal peak periods. Unlike other states in Australia, the hospitality industry is seasonal here in the Northern Territory.

Another serious consideration which is rather unique to the Northern Territory is the

remoteness for many employers. Some farmers are located 5 hours drive to the closest shopping centre and to travel to these locations from other capital cities can take more than a day. This means higher transport costs and weekly trips to town centres are difficult to facilitate. We need to think about how this issue might be overcome within the Seasonal Worker Program.

About the author/s

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