

# Pacific seasonal workers - a grower's perspective

Sue Jenkin, from Ironbark Citrus in Mundubbera Queensland, knows the challenges of finding reliable workers.

Speaking at this year's Field Day at the National Citrus Conference in Hervey Bay, Mrs Jenkin, told growers how she didn't want to solely rely on backpackers to supplement the local workforce so decided to trial the Federal Government's Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme.

"Harvesting citrus needs to be completed in tight timeframes, so it's important to have the right workers - fit, motivated, not afraid of hard work and who will stay for the entire harvest," she said.

Under the Pilot, growers having trouble sourcing local labour can approach an approved employer and specify how many workers they need and for how long. The approved employer organises recruitment from one of the participating Pacific island countries; Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga or Vanuatu.

Workers can come over for up to seven months and stay with any one grower for as long as required. Growers can also request that the same workers return in the following seasons to use their experience and expertise.

"The attractive part of the Pilot is the ability to have the workers back year after year and to actually have an increasingly experienced workforce," Ms Jenkin said.

"At the moment we are relying on backpacker labour force and therefore I am not able to get a reliable labour force."

Finding the right workers can mean the difference between completing harvest on time and losing produce due to overripe fruit or missing a commercial deadline. Martin Tindall, from All Recruiting Services, recruited 16 Tongan Pacific seasonal workers for Ironbark Citrus.

Mr Tindall travelled to Tonga to personally oversee the selection of workers for Ironbark Citrus.

After conducting police checks and other relevant background checks, Mr Tindall put the workers' fitness to the test and set-up training drills to simulate some of the physical requirements of picking citrus.

Mrs Jenkin has been impressed with the quality of the workers and is now looking forward to them returning next season.

"If these workers return next year, I feel we'll certainly reap the benefits of the experience they've gained this year," Mrs Jenkin said.

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Ironbark Citrus, Sue Jenkin.

"It is the reliability of workers, and the prospect of them returning with experience, that sets the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme apart from other forms of seasonal labour."

Mrs Jenkin said that other growers should be reassured that participating in the Pilot was cost effective.

"There have been concerns expressed by others that the scheme is too expensive so far, this hasn't been the case with our experience. Because we pay piece rates our harvest workers generally earn more anyway and it's no different from the Tongan workers that are with us now," she said.

"We pay a percentage to the approved employer, but for that percentage we get almost no administration, we don't do any of the hiring, and we don't have any of the compliance with immigration, superannuation, payroll tax - all those sorts of things."

*If you are a grower short on local labour and want to build a reliable, experienced workforce, call the Pilot information line on (02) 6240 5234, or visit [www.deewr.gov.au/pswps](http://www.deewr.gov.au/pswps) for more information.*



## Industry backs changes to Pacific labour scheme

Australia's horticulture industry and seasonal workers from the Pacific are set to benefit from changes to the Federal Government's Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme.

The changes follow consultation with the horticulture sector and approved employers after it became clear the Pilot's minimum employment period should better fit within the harvest cycle.

The Pilot will continue to be demand driven so that Australian job seekers have first access to available job opportunities.

The changes resulted from a report commissioned by the Federal Government as part of its mid-term review of the Pilot.

Whilst the global financial downturn, long running drought and the availability of alternate labour sources impacted the Pilot, the report found demand for Pacific seasonal workers was also hampered by the requirement for approved employers to guarantee workers six months work and the higher cost of Pacific seasonal workers relative to alternative sources of labour.

As the Pilot is demand driven, of the 2500 visas allocated, to date, only 136 have been utilised.

The changes, which take effect immediately, allow approved employers to engage Pacific seasonal workers for four, five or six months.

New cost sharing arrangements have also been introduced, allowing approved employers to make a similar contribution to workers' return airfares irrespective of their country of origin and enabling them to recover up to \$100 from each Pacific seasonal worker for transport costs from their port of arrival to work location.