



Australian Government
**Department of Agriculture,
Water and the Environment**

Australian Government roadmap to attract, retain, upskill and modernise the agricultural workforce

March 2021







Introduction

The Australian Government appointed the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee in December 2019 to develop a [National Agricultural Workforce Strategy](#) report. The committee, chaired by Mr John Azarias, included 11 members from academia, the education and training sector and individual agribusinesses.

From March to August 2020, the committee consulted over 300 organisations and received 117 submissions. The strategy report was submitted to the government on 22 December 2020 with 37 recommendations.

The government thanks stakeholders for contributing to the consultation and committee members for their expertise and hard work in developing the strategy report.

The committee has recommended action by Australian, state and territory governments and industry. Many of the recommendations require cooperation and collaboration between different levels of government, co-design with industry, and delivery in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders.

The agricultural sector employs over 322,000 people. Access to workers with the right skills underpins the future success of the industry. Our [Delivering Ag2030](#) plan sets the foundations for Australian agriculture to rebound from COVID-19 and build towards the agricultural sectors' vision for a \$100 billion industry by 2030. Human capital is a key theme of Ag2030 because access to a sufficient, reliable and suitable workforce is essential to achieving this target.



Committee recommendations

The committee's strategy report highlights that Australian agriculture and its supply chains represent a 'complex and sophisticated system' that relies heavily on the quality of its people. The 37 recommendations confirm the need to:

- ▶ modernise agriculture's image
- ▶ create opportunities to attract, diversify and retain the workforce
- ▶ embrace innovation
- ▶ build skills for modern agriculture
- ▶ ensure agricultural workers are treated ethically and lawfully.

The committee emphasised the importance of quality, up-to-date data to address outdated information. It recognised that migrant and overseas workers will continue to play an important part in filling workforce gaps (Table 1).

TABLE 1 National Agricultural Workforce Strategy recommendations

Recommendation	Summary
Collaboration and leadership (recommendations 1, 36 and 37)	<p>Importance of coordination by all levels of government</p> <p>Coordination by all levels of government is necessary to deliver a workforce that meets the needs of Australian agriculture. This is a shared responsibility that will require engagement by Australian, state, territory and local governments as well as industry.</p>
Sustainability (recommendation 2)	<p>Build capability in boosting productivity through sustainability</p> <p>A key challenge for agriculture will be to simultaneously increase production to supply enough nutritious food for a growing global population in ways, and using systems, that also enhance ecosystem health.</p>
Supply chains (recommendation 3)	<p>Recognise the role that all supply-chain players have in building workforce capability</p> <p>The pandemic has shown that supply-chain knowledge and collaboration is essential to the survival and success of Australia's agricultural sector.</p>
Value-adding (recommendations 4 to 5)	<p>Recognise the contribution that value-adding makes to supporting jobs</p> <p>Value-adding in the agricultural sector can add to employment and job creation. The skills and capability to innovate are critical to this.</p>
Agritech (recommendations 6 to 8)	<p>Develop new skills to support technological adoption</p> <p>A technological revolution is underway, driven by advances in information technology, field robotics and artificial intelligence. This will change the workforce and the skills it requires.</p>
Attraction and retention (recommendations 9 to 13)	<p>Understand and address public perceptions and attract new entrants</p> <p>To address poor perceptions of jobs in the sector, it is necessary to improve the attractiveness of jobs and careers on offer and raise community awareness of opportunities in the sector.</p>
Education and training (recommendations 14 to 17)	<p>Better utilise the tertiary sectors to support skills development</p> <p>Education and training are central to boosting productivity, can be engaging for all participants, add value to individual businesses and, importantly, the whole sector.</p>
Improving capability in workforce planning and management, safety and wellbeing (recommendation 18)	<p>Develop the leadership skills of employers and employees</p> <p>Management practices and the work environment affect how attractive a job is and job satisfaction. The committee found significant scope for improvement in workforce leadership and management.</p>
Empowering locally led approaches (recommendation 19)	<p>Showcase successful initiatives and approaches</p> <p>The committee heard of innovative approaches to deliver better workforce outcomes that could be used by the sector.</p>
Securing the seasonal workforce (recommendations 20 to 31)	<p>Recognise an ongoing role for migrant workers and ensure workers are treated ethically and receive their proper entitlements</p> <p>Workforce needs of agriculture fluctuate throughout the year due to the seasonal nature of production and harvest. As is the case in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, attracting domestic workers to these roles is challenging and overseas workers make an important contribution to the workforce.</p> <p>Many agricultural employers do the right thing, but there is evidence of businesses using unethical and unlawful workforce practices. This has negative impacts on individual workers and on producers who are doing the right thing. It contributes to a negative perception of the sector among potential workers.</p>
Workforce data (recommendations 32 to 35)	<p>Improved data collection, analysis and dissemination</p> <p>Agriculture has changed significantly in recent decades, but workforce data and the methods used to collect and classify data have not kept pace with these changes. The challenges and gaps this creates have implications for agriculture to plan for and meet its workforce needs and access some services.</p>



Work underway

Since March 2020, the government has responded rapidly and decisively to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to do so through a range of new measures. This includes introducing measures to support the agricultural workforce, secure overseas workers and attract domestic workers (Box 1).

In addition to these measures responding to the pandemic, the government is also implementing longer-term reforms that will provide critical support to agriculture and address issues raised by the committee (Box 2).



Box 1 Government continues to respond rapidly to COVID-19 disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the whole economy, including agriculture. Farmers still need workers to pick and pack fruit and vegetables, prune trees, shear sheep and harvest grain crops. However, domestic and international border closures have reduced workforce supply.

Historically, up to 50% of casual and contract labour positions on farms were filled by overseas workers. Horticulture growers were particularly reliant on these workers, given the intense harvesting requirements and seasonality of many fruit and vegetable crops. The supply of Working Holiday Makers has declined since March 2020 and new workers from the Pacific region were not able to arrive during the early stages of the pandemic.

The government is providing \$15.4 million in relocation and accommodation assistance for people who relocate to regional areas to take up an agricultural job. It is also providing \$16.3 million to encourage young Australians to take up farm work through temporary changes to the Youth Allowance (student) and ABSTUDY independence eligibility criteria.

Australian job seekers are being encouraged to take up seasonal work opportunities through reforms to Harvest Trail Services, which took effect on 1 July 2020. These changes expanded the services to cover 16 Harvest Areas covering all major horticultural regions.

Agricultural employers may be able to access the government's JobMaker Hiring Credit for new jobs they create between 7 October 2020 and 6 October 2021 for which they hire an eligible young person aged 16 to 35 years.

The government has made temporary changes to visas so workers who are already here can stay for longer. Visa conditions have also been relaxed to enable more visa holders to work in agriculture. The Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme has resumed in a targeted and controlled way to ensure the health of the community is protected. Agricultural skills were added to the list of critical skills that are exempt from Australia's travel restrictions.



Box 2 Government implementing reforms to benefit the agricultural workforce

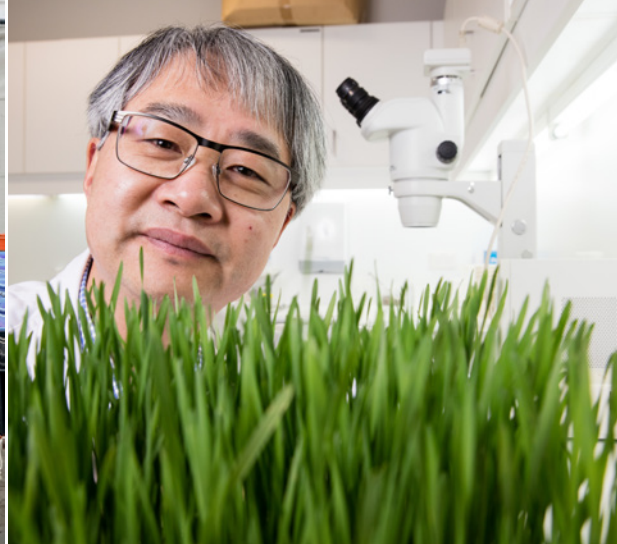
Education and training reforms

The government will continue its work to strengthen the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education sectors to help industries such as agriculture respond to change and upskill their workforce.

The VET system is central to supporting Australia's economic recovery and growth. Through the [Heads of Agreement for Skills Reform](#), all governments have committed to immediate reforms to improve VET quality and relevance along with a set of high-level reform priorities. Australian, state and territory governments are partnering to deliver the JobTrainer Fund, which is providing more Australians with access to free or low-cost training places in areas of identified skills need.

The National Skills Commission has been established and will work with policy makers, influencers, educators and students in the VET sector to prepare Australians for the workforce opportunities of the future. The National Careers Institute will ensure people have access to accurate careers information and support that draws on labour market intelligence from the National Skills Commission.

Legislation to implement the government's new Job-ready Graduate's Package received royal assent on 27 October 2020. The measures in this package enhance the sustainability, transparency and accountability of the higher education sector and make it cheaper for students to study courses in areas of national priority, including agriculture. As of 1 January 2021, student contributions for agricultural courses decreased by 59%. These measures provide more financial support for regional and remote students, fund more university places at regional and remote campuses and increase the research capacity of regional universities.



Reforms to improve compliance and enforcement with workplace obligations

The government has introduced legislation to give effect to reforms that will help ensure employers and employees – including those in the agricultural sector – understand their rights and obligations and ensure that penalties provide a deterrent against underpayment and that redress mechanisms are effective. The government is also providing \$47.3 million in new funding to the Fair Work Ombudsman over 4 years to support the reforms. For more information, see the [Industrial relations reform fact sheets](#).

National Labour Hire Registration Scheme

In the 2019-20 Budget, the government committed \$16 million in funding for design and implementation of a National Labour Hire Registration Scheme and announced that the scheme will be administered by the Fair Work Ombudsman. A National Labour Hire Registration Scheme would target rogue operators to protect vulnerable workers, and level the playing field for businesses that do the right thing. Consultation on the scheme recommenced in August 2020, after pausing in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

National Agricultural Innovation Agenda

Innovation drives productivity growth, sustainability and resilience across Australia's agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries. Through the [National Agricultural Innovation Agenda](#), the government is driving improvements to Australia's agricultural innovation system to ensure it is world-class, and can quickly respond and adapt to emerging risks and opportunities.

As part of the agenda, the government will deliver a National Agricultural Innovation Policy Statement with a set of mission-oriented agricultural innovation priorities, scale up regional agricultural hubs, and strengthen extension and adoption across agriculture. The government will also deliver a Digital Foundations for Agriculture Strategy to drive widespread uptake of digital technologies in agriculture, fisheries and forestry, supported by a leading-edge agtech sector.



Taking forward the government's response – a roadmap

Addressing agricultural workforce matters is a shared priority for all governments, including through National Cabinet, and will continue to be a key strategic focus for all Australian agriculture ministers.

The Australian Government's vision is for farmers, agribusinesses and associated supply chains to have access to sufficient and appropriately skilled workers to support a modern, innovative, resilient and growing agricultural sector.

To achieve this objective the government is focussed on themes of securing; skilling and realising the potential of the agricultural workforce, which are underpinned by leadership and foundation work (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Australian Government roadmap themes



This vision and these themes will guide the government’s consideration of further measures to address the recommendations of the National Agricultural Workforce Strategy. It will inform the shared focus for governments and industry on the strategies needed to bolster agriculture’s human capital and realise their vision of becoming a \$100 billion industry by 2030. These themes will be built on in the future by further targeted initiatives to support the sector’s human capital in line with the needs and requirements of the sector.

The government will continue our ongoing engagement with industry, state and territory governments and other stakeholders, including through targeted consultations on the National Agricultural Workforce Strategy report.





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Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
General inquiry 1800 900 090
National office +61 2 6272 3933



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