

# TURBULENT TIMES

**THE STATE OF BACKPACKING AND  
SEASONAL FARM WORK IN AUSTRALIA**  
PRELIMINARY REPORT  
JANUARY 2023



# **TURBULENT TIMES: THE STATE OF BACKPACKING AND SEASONAL FARM WORK IN AUSTRALIA**

## **PRELIMINARY REPORT**

January 2023

### **Authors**

Kaya Barry  
Rafael Azeredo  
Ari Balle-Bowness

### **Citation**

Please cite this report as: Barry, K., Azeredo, R. & Balle-Bowness, A. (2023). Turbulent Times: The State of Backpacking and Seasonal Farm Work in Australia. Brisbane: Griffith University.

### **ISBN**

978-0-6456624-0-5 (e-book)  
978-0-6456624-1-2 (print)

### **Graphic Design**

The Famous Group

### **Contact**

Dr Kaya Barry  
k.barry@griffith.edu.au  
+61 737357317

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We acknowledge the unceded lands of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples on which we live and work, and the many nations that this research was conducted on, including the Taribelang Bunda nations, and the Yirrganydji, Yidinji, and Wadjanbarra Yidi nations, and we pay respects to elders past, present, and future.

Report prepared by Kaya Barry, Rafael Azeredo, Ari Balle-Bowness.

This research was funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council (ARC). Dr Kaya Barry is the recipient of an ARC Discovery Early Career Award (project number DE220100394). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or the ARC.

Human research ethics approval was granted by Griffith University (number: 2022/104).

The authors thank the participants and interviewees for their time and willingness to share their experiences. We welcome further discussions and collaborations with members of the community and stakeholders.

We greatly acknowledge the guidance and input from Barbara Pini, Peter Adey, Bruce Buchan, Michelle Duffy, Carol Farbotko, Taukiei Kitara, Kasun Ubayasiri and Benjamin Iaquinto.







# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 Background	6
1.2 The turbulence of recent years	8
1.3 Overview of the project	8
1.4 Key areas	9
<b>2. Research Approach</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Methods	10
2.2 Visa programs	10
2.3 Geographical context	12
<b>3. Findings</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1 Pre-pandemic concerns	14
3.2 Pandemic disruptions	16
3.3 Accommodation	18
3.4 Cultural shifts	21
<b>4. Conclusion</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 Recommendations	27
4.2 Future Research	28



# Executive Summary

Migrants are an essential part of Australia's agricultural workforce. They are an immense economic benefit for farming industries, while contributing to the social and cultural liveliness of regional places. The two main visa categories that do the bulk of seasonal farm work – the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) “backpacker” program, and the newly consolidated Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM) for workers from the Pacific Islands – have expanded significantly in recent years. Considered only “temporary” due to their visa status, these people live for months, sometimes years, in regional communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the cracks in Australia's dependency on migrant workers in agriculture. Travel and visa delays, health restrictions and worry about virus outbreaks, along with the ongoing labour shortages, have resulted in a turbulent few years and significant impacts for all of those involved with facilitating and supporting migrant farm workers. While media and news continue to report major shortages of workers, fruit rotting in the fields, and farmers crying out for help, government incentives in 2022 to get migrant workers back into the regions have had limited effect. There have also been substantial shifts in social and cultural attitudes towards temporary visa holders who remained in Australia. Despite Australia's international border fully reopening in February 2022, the return of migrant workers has been slower than anticipated, especially those on WHM visas.

This report outlines preliminary findings of research on the future of seasonal farm workers in Australia. Focused on backpackers and Pacific Island workers in horticultural jobs in Queensland, insights and findings are based on 44 interviews with stakeholders across industry, government, and community who are directly involved with the facilitation of and support for migrant farm workers. The project is led by Dr Kaya Barry at Griffith University and is funded by the Australian Government through a three-year Australian Research Council Early Career Researcher Award (project number DE220100394).

Three areas of concerns and challenges that stakeholders involved with migrant farm workers face are highlighted:

- 1) Disruptions caused by the pandemic border closures and health restrictions. Efforts to contain and prevent outbreaks, instigate quarantine, and mitigate negative community attitudes towards migrants during the pandemic, reveal lessons and provide suggestions for future disasters and health crises.
- 2) The overlooked role of accommodation providers in migrant farm workers' experiences. “Working hostels” are a main conduit between seasonal employers and potential workers, and have grown in number and scale alongside expansions to the visa programs. Findings indicate the unique challenges in facilitating the daily lives of workers who live in communal accommodation.
- 3) Cultural shifts are occurring in regional communities due to a shift from backpackers to Pacific Island workers. Findings show the urgent need for Pacific-led information and support services, and better cultural awareness and communication between workers and local communities.

While this report indicates some key areas that future research could investigate further, it also sheds light on the unique challenges and perspectives across stakeholders that can be utilised in future planning and policy decisions around migrant farm workers.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Regional communities and industries are highly dependent on temporary labour migration. The agricultural sector, which is expected to contribute \$82 billion<sup>1</sup> to the Australian economy in 2022–23, relies heavily on the Working Holiday Maker “backpackers” and workers from the Pacific Islands to do the bulk of farm labour.<sup>2</sup>

*These migrant workers spend months, sometimes years, living and working in Australian regional communities. Considered only “temporary” due to their visa status, they are an important part of the social and cultural vibrancy of regional places.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the cracks in Australia’s dependency on migrant workers. Border closures, a lack of government support, delays with visa processing times, and the rising costs of living have put immense pressure on migrant workers’ experience of life in Australia<sup>3</sup>. A year on from the international border reopening, there have been unprecedented labour shortages across almost all industries, particularly in agriculture. In September 2022 the National Farmers Federation reported a shortage of at least 172,000 workers across Australia<sup>4</sup>. This shows the urgency and importance of supporting migrants as they return to regional places.

The ‘Working Holiday Maker’ visa (WHM) has allowed backpackers to become a staple source of farm labour since the mid-1970s. This hybrid tourist-labour visa has expanded over the decades, and in recent years has grown the pool of potential backpackers to 47 participating countries<sup>5</sup>. In order to extend their visa time to a second or third year, WHMs are incentivised to take up approved ‘specified work’ – particularly in horticulture – which generates a constant supply of workers for Australian farms. Prior to the pandemic, more than 200,000 WHM visas were granted every year<sup>6</sup>, making backpackers one of the main labour sources, who pick, pack, prune and plant the nation’s fruit and vegetables.

Alongside the WHM backpackers are workers from the Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste on the ‘Pacific Australia Labour Mobility’ (PALM) scheme. The newly launched PALM scheme has expanded

and consolidated the previous ‘Seasonal Worker Program’ and ‘Pacific Labour Scheme’, growing the numbers of workers from the Pacific in Australia. As of 30 September 2022, there were over 18,000 PALM workers in Australia<sup>7</sup>, a number that is expected to grow to 35,000 by June 2023<sup>8</sup>.

Together, these two migration programs fill essential jobs in the regions. Not only do these migrants bring immense economic benefits to industries and governments, they also provide long-standing social and cultural contributions to regional communities.



*This preliminary report provides a snapshot of the issues that emerged during the pandemic, and the ongoing impacts and obstacles faced during 2022, a year since borders reopened and migration resumed.*





## 1.2 The turbulence of recent years

In response to the pandemic, Australia closed its international borders to travellers who were not citizens or permanent residents. From March 2020 until late 2021, temporary visa holders were unable to enter Australia, while many who were already in Australia went back to their countries.

Despite the uncertainty during lockdowns and international and state border closures from 2020 until 2022, many backpackers decided to stay in Australia. In December 2020, at the end of the first pandemic year, there were still 50,000 WHM visa holders who remained in Australia<sup>9</sup>. Told to “go home” by the former Prime Minister in the early days of the pandemic<sup>10</sup> and receiving limited financial support from the government<sup>11</sup>, the presence of migrant workers who did remain was greatly appreciated by the horticultural sector.

Although charter flights and special quarantine arrangements were implemented for some workers from the Pacific during 2020 and 2021, the low numbers of backpackers, in combination with a lack of other temporary visa holders, made the availability of farm workers dwindle in 2021.

The return of migrant workers has been slow, despite Australia’s international border fully reopening in February 2022. As of 30 September, only 71,704 WHM visa holders were in Australia<sup>12</sup>. This is about half the pre-pandemic number, and farming communities are still feeling the effects of a lack of backpackers.

There is growing uncertainty as to when or indeed whether enough migrant workers will return to Australia. In response to labour shortages, the Australian government has also increased the list of specified work that can be undertaken to extend WHM visas, so it is expected that fewer backpackers will take up the option of farm work.

## 1.3 Overview of the project

This preliminary report is an initial part of a three-year project that aims to examine the experiences of backpackers and seasonal workers who live in communal accommodations while doing farm work in regional Queensland. Australia continues to be a popular destination for a ‘working holiday’ amongst young people, and circular mobility from the Pacific Islands is growing steadily. However, there is little understanding of how people on temporary visas experience their time spent in the arduous conditions of farm work.

The project expects to generate new knowledge using qualitative and arts-based methods on how seasonal workers navigate periods of being affixed to one place while completing required farm work, and their contribution to the social and cultural life of regional communities. Expected outcomes include a greater understanding of the contributions of seasonal labour, a public forum in 2024, recommendations and reports for industry and governments, and an art exhibition.

The project is led by Dr Kaya Barry at Griffith University and a small team of researchers: Ari Balle-Bowness, Rafael Azeredo, and Emily House. The project commenced in April 2022 and will run for three years.



## 1.4 Key areas

The turbulence of recent years has seen shifts and disruptions, which have been categorised into three interrelated areas in this report: pandemic disruptions, accommodation, and cultural shifts.

- A lack of incoming workers due to pandemic disruptions has altered the landscape of regional communities. Findings reported here highlight some of the challenges faced during the pandemic, some of which are still persisting. This includes the efforts to contain and prevent outbreaks, mitigate negative community attitudes towards migrants, and the challenges of implementing quarantine and lockdown measures in communal accommodation.
- A central focus of this project is the role of worker accommodation in the overall experience of migrant farm workers. “Working hostels” are one of the main conduits between seasonal employers and potential workers, and prior to the pandemic were expanding rapidly in numbers and capacity. But they provide much more than accommodation – they are the support networks, logistics, and cultural exchange hubs for many migrant workers in regional places. Findings here begin to map the multifaceted role of accommodation in this industry with recent growth, as well as their role in migrant communities who reside within these places.
- Cultural shifts are happening as the makeup of migrant farm workers is changing. The Pacific Islands were already a burgeoning source of horticultural labour, but the border closures meant that charter flights and remote quarantine stations injected thousands of Pacific Island workers into regional places. These findings provide insight into the day-to-day management and facilitation of these people’s working lives, and the new questions of how to best support seasonal workers from the Pacific.

*The return of migrant workers has been slow, despite Australia’s international border fully reopening in February 2022. As of 30 September, only 71,704 WHM visa holders were in Australia.*

## 2. Research approach

### 2.1 Methods

This report has been developed from primary data (interviews) collected in 2022, and is complemented by existing data from 2019, and secondary data from recent media and literature. This includes:

- Semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2022 with 44 participants across industry, government, community groups, and workers themselves. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes – 2 hours in duration.
- Findings based on ethnographic observations during field trips between May – November 2022.
- An analysis of recent academic and grey literature on seasonal migrant workers, and migration programs in Australia.
- Existing data from a 2019 pilot study, in which 82 in-depth interviews were conducted with people on temporary visas who were currently in farm work.

Together, this data and analysis form a timely snapshot of key issues and concerns facing businesses and communities, government departments and the workers themselves, as the horticultural sector navigates this post-pandemic recovery phase. The findings reported here refer to key themes that consistently emerged during interviews and observation.

### 2.2 Visa programs

This project focuses on the two main visa programs that funnel migrant workers into Australian farms: the WHM program and the PALM scheme.

#### Working Holiday Makers

Australia's WHM program encompasses 47 participating countries under two different visa subclasses (417 and 462). The two subclasses have slightly different requirements for applicants, but in general they are described and accounted for together as the 'Working Holiday Maker' visa.

The WHM visa is granted for an initial 12-month period. Applicants who undertake 88 days (3 months) of 'specified work' during this period can apply for a second-year visa, and an additional third-year visa can be granted if applicants undertake an extra 6 months of work. Specified work includes, for example, plant and animal cultivation, mining and fishing in regional Australia. Several changes were made during the pandemic, and the list of specified work has recently been expanded to include tourism and hospitality work in northern or remote and very remote Australia, and critical COVID-19 work in healthcare and medical sectors.

Commonly referred to as "backpackers", the WHM caters for people aged between 18–30 years (up to 35 years for Italian, Danish, Irish, Canadian, and French nationalities), and who have no dependants.

As of 30 June 2022, the top nations on the WHM were the United Kingdom, France, Ireland and South Korea.

#### Pacific Australia Labour Mobility

Australia's PALM scheme was launched in April 2022, consolidating the existing 'Seasonal Worker Program' (SWP) and the 'Pacific Labour Scheme' (PLS). The PALM scheme caters to 9 Pacific Island nations (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste.

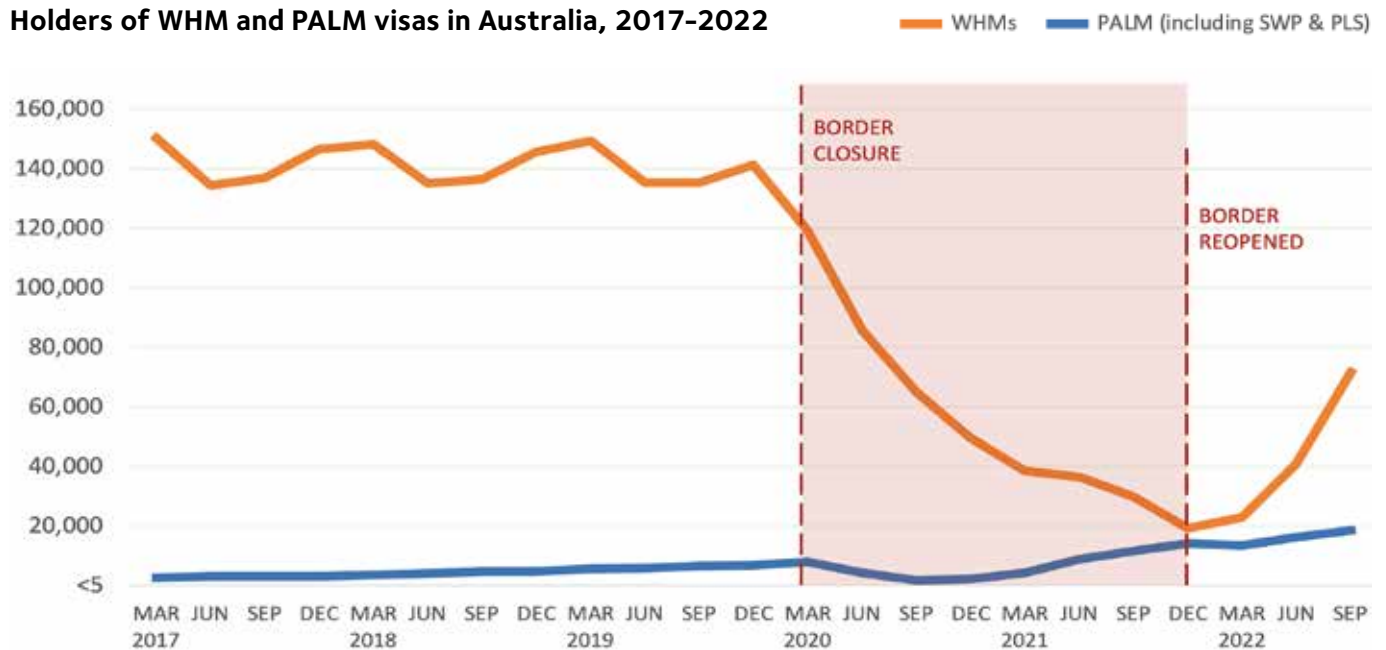
The visa allows people aged 21 years and above to live and work in Australia for a fixed period of time – either a 9-month employment for seasonal work, or a longer-term 4-year contract. They must be sponsored by an eligible employer approved by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

As of 30 September 2022, there were 18,676 people on the PALM Scheme (including SWP and PLS), and the main participating nations were Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. There are an additional 40,000 Pacific Island workers already approved to work in Australia<sup>13</sup>.

Across both visa groups focused on in this report, the numbers prior to the pandemic, and post border-reopening in late 2021, reveal a sharp decline, and slow resumption in visa holders (figure 1).



## Holders of WHM and PALM visas in Australia, 2017-2022



**Figure 1:** Visa numbers and pandemic border closures, 2017-2022

These migrant workers, while referred to throughout this report by their visa category, are diverse individuals who are from a wide range of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. To paint a better picture for readers, some general observations from existing literature and ethnographic work are provided to sketch out who these migrant farm workers may be:

For the Pacific Islanders on the PALM scheme, there is ample evidence that many are extremely qualified in healthcare, medicine, education, and policing, creating the “Pacific brain drain”<sup>14</sup>. Many PALM visa holders have children and partners back home, who are separated from visits for months and years on end. The attractiveness of higher-paid labour in Australia, means that the PALM scheme is growing rapidly, despite ample evidence of a growing precariat of Pacific workers in Australia<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, “backpackers” are often referred to as one group – despite being 47 nations on the WHM visa. While sometimes grouped into racialized sub-categories, such as the “British”, “Europeans”, or “Asians”<sup>16</sup>, backpackers are generally considered as one cohort. Many backpackers are also professionals trained in much needed skills such as nursing or education, and their time in Australia is often separated between working and tourism periods<sup>17</sup>. Many travel with a partner or friends, and form long-term social relationships while in Australia. Not all are necessarily “young partiers”, especially for the nations who are eligible up to 35 years of age. Often this group are mid-career, who are looking for a travel experience before settling down, or are taking a gap-year before further studies or changing careers.

The commonality across these two cohorts of migrant workers is that their visas have been designed to fill labour requirements in regional Australia. They live and work alongside each other. They have limited rights as visa holders, are largely and perhaps inaccurately considered to be unskilled workers and are often ‘long-term temporary migrants’<sup>18</sup>, living for months, sometimes years, in regional communities.

## 2.3 Geographical context

The project is focused on Queensland, although due to the nature of seasonal farm work, issues and findings identified in Queensland are expected to be relevant nation-wide. As labour requirements are seasonal, workers are mobile and often travel across state borders. The experiences captured in these initial findings are thus likely to be indicative of a broader geographical reach.

Interviews and field work have been carried out in two initial regions: the Wide Bay–Burnett and Far North Queensland. The fieldwork has initially been clustered around Bundaberg as the ‘hub’ for the Wide Bay–Burnett, and the Tablelands in Far North Queensland.

### Wide Bay–Burnett

The Wide Bay–Burnett region is located about 170km north of Brisbane and has a population of 307,737<sup>19</sup>. Its main hub – Bundaberg – is a city of 99,215 inhabitants with rich red soil that encourages year-round crops. Situated at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, the city is close to the national highway and serviced by long-distance rail. “Bundy”, as it is affectionately termed, on top of being a drawcard for tourists for the rum distillery, is also renowned as an important starting point for many backpackers seeking farm work. Childers, a nearby town, is a legendary backpacker drawcard: home to the historic backpacker memorial of the tragic Palace Backpackers fire in 2000<sup>20</sup>.

While domestic tourists stay an average of 3.5 nights in the region, the international visitors are indicative of high levels of WHMs – in 2019 the average night stay for international visitors was 20.9 nights – well above the state-wide average of 7 nights<sup>21</sup>. The area is a drawcard for backpackers who stay significantly longer here in



**Figure 2:** Map of the Wide Bay–Burnett region.



tourist accommodation than elsewhere in Queensland. The region boasts a range of worker accommodation facilities: 14 hostels, alongside 38 registered share accommodation facilities (at the time of writing), and year-round harvest labour available.

## Far North Queensland

Far North Queensland (FNQ) is an extensive region of farmlands and tropical landscapes with a population of 294,300<sup>22</sup>, whose main city is the holiday destination of Cairns. The Tablelands, a subsection of FNQ with a population of 26,244<sup>23</sup> that includes the key agricultural towns of Atherton and Mareeba, are another well-known starting point for backpackers coming from Cairns. It has ease of access with international and domestic flights, and a short drive over the range. There is a broad variety of crops, alongside a selection of hostels and campground accommodation (currently 9 premises at the time of writing). Cairns is also in the approved postcodes for backpackers to take up “regional work” in hospitality for their visa requirements.



**Figure 3:** Map of the Far North Queensland region.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Pre-pandemic concerns

A pilot project was carried out in 2019, which involved 82 in-depth interviews and observation with people on temporary visas who were undertaking farm work in and around the Wide Bay–Burnett region. This included 40 WHMs, as well as Pacific Island workers on the SWP, international students, and undocumented workers.

It is important to note that although these participants were interviewed while they were in the Wide Bay–Burnett region, their experiences and stories capture a range of working locations and hostels around Australia.

This pre-pandemic data sets the backdrop for some of the concerns that were present before the pandemic, and informs the context for the three themes in the 2022 interviews.

The field work conducted in 2019 revealed several issues faced by many migrant workers when undertaking farm work, including exploitative labour conditions and precarious accommodation arrangements. While this was not the experience for all workers, these interview findings paint a grim picture. This was at a time when there was significant public debate around the exploitation and poor treatment of migrant workers in media reporting and recent government inquiries.<sup>24</sup>

Seasonal farm workers are a highly-mobile cohort, so their overall experiences are difficult to pin down to precise geographic locations. Many people interviewed were happily completing their required farm work in the region, after facing significant issues and challenges elsewhere in Australia. However, these pre-pandemic findings set the backdrop for future inquiry into the conditions that current and future migrant farm workers may be facing.

### 2019 key findings

- The majority of WHMs interviewed had a professional skill, qualification/degree, or significant experience (e.g. teachers, nurses, accountants, engineers) beyond farm work.
- All participants interviewed, and in extensive informal conversations with workers during field work, revealed their desire to remain in Australia beyond their current visa duration, if given the option.
- Language barriers, for people who had English as another language, were cited a major obstacle to understanding the basic inductions and training for farm jobs. Participants said they often felt “embarrassed” to ask for clarification or repetition of instructions, and that this impacted on their performance and ability to do the work.
- Poor standards of hostel accommodation were a common grievance. While many hostels were asking reasonable weekly prices and had an excellent reputation, these “better” hostels were difficult to get a bed in. Some hostels had waitlists, and word-of-mouth recommendations of departing guests for new arrivals were prized. Common complaints related to lack of cleanliness and access to basic facilities such as fridges, bathrooms, and storage of personal belongings.
- Exploitation and confusion on the “piece rate” system (this was in widespread use until April 2022, when a minimum casual wage was introduced). Participants were asked their pay rates in their current and previous jobs, and the responses ranged from as little as \$5/hour (one backpacker picking cherry tomatoes), to well above minimum wage of \$32/hour (a backpacker at an avocado farm).
- Over half said they were being paid less than the minimum casual hourly rate, because they were on the “piece rate” system.
- Several interviews revealed that hostel roommates were being paid at different rates, despite working alongside each other in the same jobs for the same employer or contractor.
- Indication that there are different pay rates and working conditions according to nationality (e.g. “Europeans” versus “Asians”) was commonly described by participants.
- Incidents of racial abuse and sexual harassment from employers were reported in many interviews, including several instances of serious abuse. This was often associated with situations where the worker had raised financial queries or visa concerns, and most people said they didn’t feel able to report the incident. Almost all females interviewed recounted sexual assault or harassment either first-hand, or experiences of close friends or workmates.
- Difficulties with the reporting process to apply for the second-year and (recently introduced) third-year WHM visa. Although the Home Affairs guidelines state what days and jobs are eligible, issues such as cancellation of work due to bad weather, disputes over how many hours per day count as a ‘full day’, sick days, and missing payslips, were common issues that participants recounted as complicating their accumulation of required days.







## 3.2 Pandemic disruptions

Prior to the border closures in March 2020, backpackers were in constant supply. At the end of 2019, there were over 140,000 WHMs in the country. At the end of 2020, around 50,000 backpackers remained; and when borders reopened in December 2021, there were only about 20,000 working holiday makers still in Australia.<sup>25</sup> But for those migrants who did remain in Australia during these difficult times, their presence was greatly appreciated as they continued to pick, pack, plant, and process fresh produce across the nation. They became longer-term members of regional towns, some becoming part of local footy teams and church choirs, while others volunteered after the 2020 bushfires<sup>26</sup> or in the widespread flood relief in 2022.<sup>27</sup>

The number of Pacific Islanders on temporary work visas in Australia had been consistently growing since 2012 and, prior to the border closures, there were about 7,000 people on the PLS and SWP visas (which are being consolidated into the new PALM scheme). The numbers dropped to under 2,000 in September 2020, but later increased with special quarantine provisions, charter flights, and border exemptions granted to fill urgent labour shortages during the pandemic. By December 2021, there were around 14,000 PALM workers in Australia.

The initial months and lockdowns in 2020 were difficult for everyone interviewed in the project. Health regulations were hastily employed and enforced, but as these findings show, they did not adequately cater for communal living arrangements.

### Health requirements

A lack of clarity and consistency in the public health requirements for people living in communal or shared accommodation, who were considered “essential workers”, was a frustration across all of the interviews with accommodation operators.

A main challenge shared in interviews with hostel operators was the struggle to implement the “household bubble” procedures during pandemic restrictions. Designed to keep physical contact to a minimum, Queensland Health recommended that shared accommodation providers grouped their residents into “household units”, where people could leave the premises for work or essential trips together. Communal areas were required to limit people’s access on a timed roster, and: “guests will need to maintain a minimum distance of 1.5 metres from other guests at all times”.<sup>28</sup>

This was obviously difficult to enforce in accommodation facilities where dozens of workers lived together, and some hostels were “home” to over 100 workers. The health requirements were inadequate for the nature of seasonal farm workers, in that the expectations did not understand their interwoven work and living situations. One hostel manager explained:

*“You can’t just separate them into ‘housing groups’ – they drive together, work together, do everything together. That’s dozens of people”*

Similar frustrations were shared by a farmer with on-site accommodation. They explained that the workers would “go to town together as one big group. They weren’t breaking the rules though, that’s how they live”. All of the accommodation providers interviewed said they’d had police escorting their residents home, due to being out in public spaces in groups.

Even trying to limit the number of people who were using communal areas in hostels was difficult. One hostel owner explained:

“They had this ‘one-in-four-square-metre’ rule ... for kitchens, TV room, bathrooms, the office counter, hallways. It was impossible. I put the case forward that we’re a hostel, and they are long-term residents. They live here, it’s like a family. It’s not [people] coming and going like a motel.”

Another hostel reported that they had been directed to implement a timed roster for when their residents could use communal facilities:

“We had to do a time schedule for who could use the kitchen, only two or four people could use it at a time. We had to have an action plan. We had to limit everyone from one room, only one at a time, but, it was the fear, I was such a big thing. We were all scared.”

All expressed frustration at the visits from Queensland Health (and some from police) during 2020, and several premises received additional COVID-related checks in 2021. A key concern was that these communal accommodation places were defined in the public health guidelines as having “guests” rather than “residents” who lived there on a long-term rental basis.

Each interviewee was asked if they thought the health regulations for worker accommodation were adequate. Several people came close to tears during these interview questions, as they recalled the impact of the regulations on residents and staff. One hostel manager said bluntly: “Well, it was made by someone who hasn’t done it, who’s never set foot in a hostel.” After a pause, their colleague added:

“How are you going to limit access to a TV room or a kitchen? How would you monitor how much time they’re sat watching TV? Would you like someone in your house telling you how long you can cook in the kitchen for?”

All accommodation operators and farmers said they were concerned about possible health regulations and restrictions in future.

## Isolation and quarantine

As the pandemic stretched on, and more people were getting sick with COVID, trying to keep residents isolated was a challenge. Even if they had not tested positive, but had cold and flu symptoms, all of the accommodation providers saw this as an immense juggling act, trying to prevent an outbreak. Several hostels emptied out storerooms or converted the lounge or TV room into ad-hoc accommodation for isolating sick residents.

Several businesses brought in workers from the Pacific Islands in 2020 and 2021 while the international border was closed. There was “a scramble to get quarantine set up”, as one farmer explained, “we needed staff, we were desperate”. The process took months, and many levels of government departments and approvals. Once the custom-built quarantine facility had been created on the farm, several other businesses asked for their help to bring in workers either from interstate or from overseas charter flights. In this instance, costs for the flights, transport, security, medical testing, food and quarantine lodgings, were covered by the employer bringing in the workers. They ran the quarantine facility for local businesses without making any profit. Although they successfully brought in hundreds of workers in 2020 and 2021, it was not nearly enough to fill the labour shortages.

Migrant workers, desperately needed across the country, were further isolated by state border closures. A highly-prohibitive and complex process of applying for inter-state relocation and transportation during much of 2020 and 2021 prohibited easy mobility for seasonal workers, and many found themselves ‘stuck’ in whatever state they had been working in during early 2020. For those who were able to cross state borders, this presented a problem for accommodation providers when they arrived. One hostel manager explained how they’d have to check their travel itineraries, their interstate border passes and permits, and asked for receipts for their 14-day quarantine accommodation for when they had first arrived in Queensland. They said “we had several people who had obviously snuck across”, who they turned away, despite desperately needing additional workers.

## Lack of workers in 2022

While most accommodation providers and farms maintained enough workers during 2020, as 2021 progressed, and as 2022 now draws to a close, the shortage of workers continues. People’s visas have expired, some returned home when international borders reopened, and others have transitioned to other industries and visa categories. Farming communities have been left scratching for emergency workers, with many stories of the local community helping to harvest crops at key times. One hostel owner who provided labour to a nearby farm recounted how they volunteered their time:

“The farmer rang up in tears, so we decided to gather people to go help ...It’s been good, and it’s sort of given us an idea what the

backpackers do, too ... we hadn’t worked on farm ourselves, so we got to experience their job”.

A farmer explained how their berry harvest had brought in members of the local community to help:

“We dropped everything, we shut the whole farm operations down, the pack shed, everything. Everyone who could, we just went and worked, as berries were falling on the ground. All the staff here, the tractor drivers, bus drivers, everything.”

Another farm said the local school rounded up families to come and pick. Across the board, the interviews reflected the desperation for more workers. Several interviews said they’d heard from newly arrived backpackers that they had waited months for their WHM visa to be granted. One hostel operator explained that, in July, they were fielding phone calls and emails from backpackers overseas who are:

*“Hesitant to come to Australia. They want to come and do the working holiday, but Australia’s known as the ‘lockdown country’ now”.*

Four of the hostels had heard similar questions from young people in recent months: “What if we get stuck? Who will help us book a flight back home?” A dozen backpackers who were interviewed in August 2022 said they were not concerned about possible lockdowns or border closures, because as one person described: “well I’m here now. I’d be happy to be stuck in Australia”.

The government incentives to get people into farm work also were not highly regarded when mentioned in the interviews. The Harvest Trail relocation fee of \$2,000 for visa holders, or \$6,000 for Australian workers<sup>29</sup>, only ran until 30 June 2022, and several WHMs who were interviewed reported that they had not yet received their payments for it in June 2022. Similarly, the visa refund fee of \$495 for WHMs had little effect as a draw card in the eyes of the interview participants. Widely reported in media, long visa processing times<sup>30</sup> further hampered the ability for WHMs to arrive in Australia.











### 3.3 Accommodation

Communal accommodation often plays a key role in a migrant farm worker's experience of regional places. Prior to the pandemic, "working hostels" had become a staple part of the migrant farm worker situation, linking employees with farming jobs, as well as providing transportation and accommodation.

Accommodation takes many forms, and although widely referred to as a "working hostel", these may be a variety of housing styles and setups:

- Traditional "backpackers" lodgings, often an old pub or hotel that have long been a traveller rest stop in the centre of town. These generally have anywhere between 2 – 18 bunk beds in a room, with shared communal facilities such as kitchens, bathrooms, and recreational areas.
- Converted motels or hotels, in which a strip of smaller rooms, housing 2–6 people per room, provide a more self-contained set up for residents.
- There are also camping grounds, van parking areas, cabins, dongas, farm houses, and more. These may be in a larger cluster on an accommodation site, or on-farm accommodation.

In addition, the accommodation conditions are determined by the visa category:

- For workers from the Pacific, their accommodation is tied to their visa. This means that their accommodation must have had prior approval to host workers (on the PALM or the previous PLS and SWP) and meet the minimum requirements and facilities (such as a set number of bathrooms, secure lockers and storage, etc.). Accommodation is secured before the workers arrive in Australia.
- For workers on the WHM or other temporary visas, the situation is a little more haphazard. Some working hostels provide accommodation for workers, but simply refer them on by word-of-mouth to potential farmers or labour-hire contractors. Others will facilitate everything for people who are staying at the hostel – providing accommodation, transport, employment, and deducting these costs from their wages. Some accommodation providers that will stipulate that in order to be a resident, the workers must be employed through their facilitation (e.g. they cannot go and find their own job, they need to take the job that the hostel has provided).



**Figure 4:** Sketches of working hostels in Queensland  
(Source: Kaya Barry)



## The hostel atmosphere

Nine accommodation providers were interviewed, and comments represent owner-operators or on-site managers. All of these participants were involved in the day-to-day activities, and experience ranged from around 12 months to 18 years' involvement with worker accommodation. Each was asked questions about the organisation and layout, the facilities provided, provisions for social or cultural activities, and the mobility and transportation that their residents have access to.

Everyone involved in accommodation expressed how challenging their job could be, having to negotiate multiple cultures and languages of their residents, and "wrangling backpackers" into line, as one person described.

*Operating worker accommodation means that they are often managing a large portion of people's lives: the living, working, and social aspects of dozens of people.*

One hostel manager explained how stressful facilitating farm work could be:

"You'd bend over backwards finding the jobs, and they would get sacked, and then they would bag you out all over social media. They always make out it to be the hostel's problem, even though, majority of the time it was them. They were lazy, or missed work, so they got the sack."

It was evident in many interviews that accommodation operators have long-standing relationships with farmers and local businesses, where their friendships and dependency on providing labour adds another layer of complexity. Recent years of low migrant numbers have obviously strained these relationships, as workers began negotiating for higher pay or different conditions outside of the initial employment arrangements made by the working hostels. However, as several hostel operators explained, they foresee that hostels will remain a main conduit for migrant farm labour:

"It's easy for them [the farmers], it's one phone call to the hostel. If they want 20 people [to work], they know they're going to get 20 people. Instead, of, say, if they get workers staying in a caravan park or campground, they might turn up, they might not. Because we're here 24/7 [in the hostel], they know we are going to get them up and get there [to work]. If they're sick or drunk or hungover, well, we don't let them on the bus, we find someone else."

The approval process for housing workers on the PALM scheme has raised new concerns amongst accommodation providers. One labour hire company described:

"We've got a minimum standard of accommodation. But, you can't get accommodation anywhere, I mean, it's in such short supply in the whole of Australia. So, we're saying to people: 'Okay, if that's the standard you want, they're going to have to pay X for it'. That's where disputes on high accommodation costs begin."

Meeting the minimum requirements of the PALM has meant several hostels interviewed had to renovate and upgrade their facilities.

Additional financial pressures such as maintaining fleets of work vehicles and high insurance costs for property and vehicles, were other factors that add to the weekly accommodation rates. "They whinge about the [accommodation] costs, but they don't run the business and see how much it is costing us", one hostel said. A representative from Harvest Trail explained that the convenience of having employment, accommodation, and transport packaged together by hostels was a big drawcard for WHMs and other "itinerant workers who haven't purchased a car yet, or may not have their driver's license." In Far North Queensland, several businesses said they were unable to purchase suitable replacement fleet vehicles due to current shortages of new and second-hand vehicles in the country. The ability for hostels to pool workers together into employment groups that match the transportation availability was a positive mentioned in most interviews. In addition, the reliability of working hostels as a primary source of workers is desirable for short term crops, and provides flexibility, as another representative from Harvest Trail described.

In addition to existing stresses of facilitating accommodation for workers, the pandemic changed the general atmosphere in hostels, and their reputation in the broader community. Accommodation providers were asked about their interaction with local community and neighbours. The responses were varied, and several said neighbours had caused "significant stress" in the early days.

In 2020 and even into 2021, several hostels had received abuse, threats, and even minor damage to their premises by people targeting "migrants" who might "have the virus", or were "taking Aussie jobs", as two interviews reported. One hostel explained that after the initial lockdown in Queensland, around June 2020 they had: "people abusing our guests, yelling 'dirty hostels' as they drove past." They put up curtains and blankets against street-facing windows in their suburban neighbourhood. Another hostel had to erect a taller fence around the premises, as their residents said people were peering in over the fence. Another accommodation provider said several of their backpacker residents came home saying they'd been yelled at in the street. While this reaction from the public dissipated as 2020 progressed, it clearly left an impression and was a shock to these businesses and communities.

## Informal share houses

All accommodation providers were extremely frustrated by rumours and reports of “illegal” and informal worker accommodation and share houses. Prior to the pandemic, two local councils reported they had high levels of share houses that were not approved as places for shared or communal accommodation. A representative from a regional council, in the building compliance unit, described some of the inspections that they’d done:

“Some housing is better than others. Some places have two people in a bedroom, and that might be just two mattresses on the floor. Others might have four bedrooms, with four people in each bedroom, with bunk beds.”

Issues that complaints identified included: mattresses on the floor (no bed frames), no wardrobes or storage, bed bugs, only one bathroom and kitchen for more than a dozen people in a regular house, vehicles parked on the yard or street, and excess noise, among other issues. The council representative elaborated on a typical scenario they see:

“One person is the ‘house boss’. They rent a house from the real estate, so that might be, say, \$400 a week. But then they’ve got 12 people in that house and they’re all paying \$110 a week. ... They would tell us, ‘You give me \$100 a week, and I’ll give you free WiFi and I’ll take you to work each day’. The worst ones hold passports; they would force you to work every day”

Working in conjunction with the fire department, and based on complaints received from the public, local councils, police, and the hostels all said much more awareness of reporting illegal share houses is needed. A hostel operator explained that they often take in workers who have come from other illegal share houses, or dubious ‘hostels’ that do not sound up to standard. They said Pacific Island workers who had previously stayed in their hostel called for help earlier in the year:

“I went out and saw where they live, and it was really sad ... They all came down with COVID, and they actually rang me for help instead [of the accommodation provider], because they had no food, no medications, nothing. ... The conditions were really poor. Far too many people and there were bunk beds jammed in everywhere”.

Each accommodation provider was asked what they thought could be done to improve conditions across the board. Three said they wanted more regular council checks, even though it was an inconvenience to them, they felt it would crack down on poor standards elsewhere. A local council representative said that there needs to be more reporting by workers too, and more awareness that these are confidential reports and have no bearing on their employment or visa conditions.

## Uncertainty about the future

All of the accommodation operators had concerns around the dropping number of workers. They had all been full or near capacity when the pandemic began. All but two accommodation providers had closed due to a lack of residents during 2020 or 2021.

Also notable were the recent changes to the WHM visa – most interviews mentioned the upcoming change for UK WHMs under the UK-AU free trade agreement, who will no longer be required to complete 88 days of farm work, and instead be granted a three-year visa automatically. One hostel explained: “The British were our biggest backpacker group here. If they go... well, we need them as a business”. Another accommodation operator said:

*“The system wasn’t broken before. Maybe it needed a bit of tweaking. But cancelling the UK farm work, I think is wrong ... They’ll still come here, but it won’t have the kind of long-term effect we need”*

Similar concerns were aired from a labour hire organisation:

“Now that the UK has been exempt, I don’t think it’s going to take long for that exemption to drop away. With the demand for labour in all sectors, hospitality, care, tourism, that could be a real issue.”

All stakeholders interviewed expressed concerns about changes to the 88-day requirement, in that WHMs could now do hospitality and tourism in new regions. It is unclear how long this will remain in place. All who were involved with accommodation in some way commented on the dramatic impact that is having on agriculture, as well as on their role as accommodation providers.

### 3.4 Cultural shifts

As backpacker numbers dwindled, new groups of PALM workers were brought to Australia during 2021 via charter flights and quarantine facilities. Many businesses have shifted from working almost exclusively with WHMs to the newly arrived workers from the Pacific Islands. Prior to the border closures, in 2019 there were around 7,000 workers on the SWP and PLS in Australia. The numbers grew significantly in the past year, and as of September 2022, there were over 18,000 PALM workers.<sup>31</sup>

An increased awareness of the importance of migrant workers in regional communities was a strong theme across the interviews. While the early days of the pandemic saw incidents of racism and abuse, the extensive labour shortages throughout 2022, along with ample media coverage on the issue, seem to be shifting public acceptance of the need for migrant workers.

A representative from a regional Harvest Trail office described:

“There were a lot of farmers that stipulated they only wanted itinerant workers. It was this misconception that the locals were just no good. They didn’t want a bar of them, and it has taken quite some time to change the mindset... but saying that, I had other employees that said: ‘I don’t want a Dutch backpacker’, or, ‘I don’t want an Asian backpacker’. So, we’ve done a lot of work to change the mindset that it’s not the nationality – it’s the person.”

These comments are indicative of stereotypes about some nations being “better” workers, based on racial undertones, or simply past experience with a select nationality of migrant workers.

They were evident in the pre-pandemic data, and again in interviews with stakeholders during 2022. Several interviews commented on the realisation amongst regional communities that “foreigners are not taking Aussie jobs”, as one participant bluntly said.

#### The need for leadership by and for Pacific Islanders

A key message across the interviews was the need for PALM workers to have cultural leadership and guidance from Pacific people. Building awareness and information resources for people and businesses that are directly involved with PALM workers should be coming from Pacific people, not Australians. “Leadership must come from Pacific people themselves”, one participant who provides support services for PALM workers stated. A Pacific diaspora is already present across many regional areas, and it is evident from the interviews that these communities are already being sought out for informal support services.

None of the interviewees who were signed up for the PALM scheme (e.g. accommodation operators, farmers, or labour hire / Approved Employers) had received any type of formal cultural

awareness training or induction for working with Pacific peoples. It should be noted that at this initial stage in the project, stakeholders interviewed were almost all white Australians, and had little interaction with Pacific Islanders or the diaspora communities prior to their encounters with workers. After being approved for the PALM scheme (and the previous PLS and SWP), several hostels and farms said they had approached community organisations, sports clubs, or churches that had existing residents who are part of the Pacific diaspora. Several interviewees said they had sought out local churches to visit their accommodation on a regular basis for services, pastoral care, and in-language events.

There was a consensus that some kind of formal cultural induction and training would benefit those people and businesses who are engaged with the PALM workers. The Pacific Island Council of Queensland (PICQ) is a key actor, and several participants said they had liaised directly with PICQ for advice and support. Further, several interviewees asked the lead researcher (Kaya Barry) for advice and recommendations of who or where to seek cultural training from. Only a small number of stakeholders who were interviewed are Pacific Islanders themselves. However, they all said that responsibility of the diaspora, and the wealth of support and compassion that the diaspora can be, needs to be a key part of future policy making and decisions. Direct involvement with Pacific communities from the start, who can work with newly arrived PALM workers in-language and form connections to the diaspora community, was suggested in interviews.

#### WHMs or PALM?

Five participants who had recently become directly involved with Pacific Island workers said they would “switch back” to WHM backpackers when numbers resumed, as their preferred residents or workers. Differences in behaviour, culture, and the availability for different kinds and durations and types of farm work were cited.

In addition, farmers commented on the stereotypical physical differences in workers – “bigger bodies” and “more stamina” for PALM workers, as one person said, and overall much more enthusiasm for working, were common reflections among farmers and labour hire contractors. Overwhelmingly the appreciation for good, dedicated workers on the PALM scheme shone through the interviews with farmers and accommodation providers.

Several people reflected on how the Pacific Island workers were approached more like “family”, due to the fact they were living and working for significantly longer periods than WHMs who they’d previously dealt with. One person said: “You end up being their mother, father, uncle, the whole lot, to a lot of people”. Another person said they’d kept in contact with almost all their previous workers, once they’d returned home to their families. “We keep in touch like extended family ... we took our kids to visit them on holiday to their village”.



Across all interviews, the consensus was that after an initial adjustment period of living in Australia, the majority of Pacific Island workers “settled in” to life in Australia. But the need for Pacific-led leadership and representation was a point stressed in many interviews.

## Culture shock

A kind of initial “shock”, as one hostel manager described, was expressed by several participants who had newly become involved with workers from the Pacific Islands. Several interviews described in depth their adjustment to different living practices, cultural routines, and comments on how Pacific workers came into hostels and behaved quite differently from backpackers they had previously hosted. Issues with the design of the communal hostel facilities were a common comment. One hostel manager said:

“Imagine the largest guys on the footy team, say 6 ft. 130kg, and that’s just one guy, coming in roaring drunk after a night on the town, they just destroy the joint. It’s by accident, they’re big guys. \$30 grand of damage later...”

These issues were not exclusive to PALM workers, and when prompted, accommodation providers did reflect on the damage and issues that WHM backpackers brought, but growing tensions were evident. A lack of planning, and follow-up checks, beyond the initial accommodation approval process when signing up to PALM, was remarked on.

Although many comments were light-hearted, there were also negative comments about facilitating the day-to-day aspects of Pacific Islander workers, compared to previous experiences with backpackers. This varied from queries and misunderstandings around the sleeping arrangements, to workers arriving from rural villages who did not know how to operate kitchen appliances, or different approaches to meal preparation. Several farmers reported they had to inform workers that due to the tough nature of farm work, out in the open, they had to eat well-rounded food (“not just the free veggies they take home by the kilo”). There were also reports of “stealing” animals or buying live animals to bring back to the hostel, which was viewed negatively. Another hostel said their neighbours complained their backyard chickens had been stolen; while a local farmer had reported to police that their calves had gone missing. All these alleged reports were attributed to the newly arrived workers from the Pacific Islands. These isolated incidents may seem minor, but during field work the research team heard conversations and rumours of similar events, indicative of local town gossip.

Alcohol was another contentious issue raised in most interviews. Accommodation providers were concerned about how to manage weekend drinking in Pacific Island workers, which several said had been less of an issue to supervise with backpackers. Excess drinking, which several people explained was clearly an emotional response or “coping mechanism”, was a widespread concern. Alcohol

consumption has risen during the pandemic across Australia, so there is little surprise that Pacific Islanders on temporary visas are also feeling these effects.

An interview with a Sergeant from Queensland Police Service in a regional town indicated that the increasing numbers of Pacific Island workers was a priority for them – in terms of engagement during their initial arrival, and providing education and resources for local businesses. The Sergeant explained that they had seen an increase of “issues around drinking in excess, drink driving, domestic violence ... some of the community weren’t used to that. The pubs weren’t used to it [to this extent]”. They explained that these issues are not unique to workers from the Pacific, although a sudden influx of several hundred PALM workers could:

“Make it seem that way. But if you were new, or travelling, you’d expect that on your down time you’d be able to have a bit of fun, going to the pub, having a few beers – like anybody – Australians do it as well. They’re here for a good time ... these people are part of the community”

Several accommodation providers had recently switched to being “dry” spaces, a comment that was repeated as a suggestion in many stakeholder interviews. By banning alcohol consumption from worker’s private accommodation, and in combination with several pubs making “bans” on Pacific Islanders at the door, this is having obvious effects and division in the community. A hostel operator said this had:

“Pushed them onto the street. Then the comments on [social media] groups start, the local town bitches, moans, gossip, whatever, [and then] videos of drunken Islanders at the pub, and then a million comments on it.”

Growing division between “locals” and “Islanders” was a concern across all stakeholders, fuelling racist slurs and attitudes towards PALM workers that are appearing more frequently in local town gossip. The QPS Sergeant explained in detail that this was an issue they were working on with the community, to build awareness and education for all residents. In conjunction with Pacific Island community groups and local diaspora and PALM, QPS had produced a series of posters in 11 Pacific languages, describing safety messages, fines, deterrent messages for speeding, wearing seatbelts, and common offences. The Sergeant explained:

“We’ve got a need in community to get advice and information out through hostels, farms, and we’ve been putting [signs] up in bottle shops, pubs, workplaces as well. For people to read in their own language.”

However, there is a clear need for on-arrival education and support that is led by local Pacific communities. The pandemic border closures exacerbated issues, as many workers were unable to return to their home countries or visit family. Anticipating these issues, many of which are linked to absconding from their employment, was a point several participants made.



## 4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts have sparked a rethinking of what kinds of workers the Australian horticultural industry needs and can support. The extreme labour shortages seen in 2021 and throughout 2022 demonstrate the ongoing reliance that Australian horticulture has on migration schemes, such as the PALM and WHM. While often treated under the single label of 'seasonal migrants', these cohorts are unique and increasingly diverse. Combined, the WHM program and PALM scheme encompass over 50 nationalities.

*These people's contribution to Australia goes way beyond being simply 'temporary migrant workers'. They are long standing members of regional communities, and contribute to vibrant cultural and social spaces in these areas. Yet they face unique challenges due to the nature of their migration status, visa conditions and future migration prospects.*

This report has shown some of the challenges and concerns that stakeholders and actors involved with these workers face. It has also shown the shifting attitudes and understandings of regional communities that host these workers, as well as the contributions that they bring across economic, social, and cultural life.

### 4.1 Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations based on preliminary data:

- Further understanding and awareness across stakeholders, industry, and community of the longer-term roles that WHMs and PALM workers play in regional communities. Interviews revealed that many people who work for months and years in regional farming jobs desire to remain in these jobs and live in Australia beyond their current visa time.
- Across both visa cohorts, the significant breadth of skills and experience in areas beyond low-skilled agricultural roles appears vastly underused and overlooked. Regional communities would benefit from policies that mobilise this under-utilised talent that is already available.
- Industry and stakeholder groups would benefit from further consultation prior to changes to visa conditions, as well as improved transparency and clarity in relation to changes.
- The implications and effects following changes to WHM and PALM visa conditions should be monitored by policymakers and industry. All stakeholders expressed concerns about the ongoing modifications to the WHM visa, especially in relation to the required "88 days" work in the first year, and six-months in the second year, for visa extensions.
- Further communication on the intentions and design for the upcoming change to the UK WHM visa holders is needed, particularly in relation to changes in the work requirements for a second and third-year visa.
- Utilising the lesson learned from the pandemic to better guide future health restrictions and directives. Documenting how health restrictions were facilitated and implemented for temporary visa holders who are in essential work will be useful to prepare for future crises and outbreaks.
- Further consideration on how communal accommodation facilities are categorised and allocated health requirements during crisis and outbreak is needed. Findings indicate confusion and inadequate measures related to lockdown periods, isolation procedures, and the use of 'household bubble' procedures.
- Further recognition is needed across stakeholders involved with migrant farm workers on the role of accommodation providers as key actors in facilitating these visa programs. Accommodation providers are a significant conduit between farmers and workers, and act as support services, information hubs, and more, for migrants in regional places. These providers can offer rich information and learnings for future planning of labour and visa expansion/development.



- More coordination and communication would be welcomed across a range of actors in the community – local councils, government departments, police, and community groups. These communication networks can be utilised to design adequate support and information resources for both workers and industry.
- Need for cultural training and awareness workshops for people involved with PALM workers. All of the participants directly involved with PALM workers voiced that cultural training would have helped them prepare for the change in workers' profile and better support these communities.
- Further dialogue between cultural and community groups and the Pacific diaspora in regional areas is encouraged. This could be facilitated by general/public events and seminars, or specific events and workshops for stakeholders involved with PALM.
- New conversations between government, industry, and community groups on permanent residency pathways or longer visa opportunities for essential workers in agriculture on the WHM and PALM visas would be valuable.
- Workers, accommodation providers, and regional communities more broadly, would benefit from further clarification and discussion of their rights and responsibilities under the PALM scheme in relation to alcohol consumption. Consultation and information opportunities to bring together workers, alcohol service providers, Approved Employers, health services, and police, on the attitudes and behaviours around alcohol consumption. Existing informal events and information sessions are being deployed in several areas, but more investment in community-led and culturally informed services could be provided on a regular basis to cater for newly arrived migrant workers.
- Further dissemination across the public and local communities on the "good" and "positive" contributions of migrant farm workers would contribute to social cohesion in smaller regional areas, especially where the growth of migrant workers has been significant in the past months. Further encouragement and support for workers to be directly involved in community activities would also be valuable, i.e. invitations to sporting teams, churches, recreational groups, art/culture activities, and showcases. Assistance of local journalists and media on reporting.

## 4.2 Future Research

This report has provided an initial snapshot of issues and concerns facing various stakeholders involved with migrant workers within the Australian horticultural industry. Future research and investigation for this project and additional research is needed in the following areas:

- Representation and dialogue with the Pacific Island diaspora and community groups. This is crucial in giving a platform and voice for Pacific workers that is in consultation with their peers, families, and elders.
- Conversations and opportunities to directly involve workers themselves in the design and expression of the migrant farm worker experience. Using storytelling, arts practice, and/or photographic documentation to share and tell their stories of life working in Australia. This will help raise knowledge in the general public on the important role of migrant farm workers.
- Further inquiry into the daily routines and transportation options of workers. The ability to move around outside of work (for leisure, tourism, or visiting friends/family) was an issue that arose in many conversations in this preliminary data, but further information is needed on the apparent lack of transportation options and resources in regional and remote areas.
- Further inquiry into the influence of weather in the larger picture of migrant mobility and choice of work destination. Climate change and severe weather is another key area that influences the everyday lives of farming communities. 2022 saw extreme flooding and rainfall across much of Australia, impacting the working hours and ability for harvest in many regions, as well as transportation and movement of workers between regions at times.

# References

- <sup>1</sup> **ABARES.** 2022. Agricultural outlook. Available at: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-outlook>
- <sup>2</sup> **Dufty et al.** 2019. Demand for farm workers. Available at: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour/labour-survey-2018> **ABARES.** 2021. Labour use in Australian agriculture. Available at: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour>
- <sup>3</sup> **Petrou, K. et al.** 2021. 'Pacific labour mobility on pause...' (pp.299-319). In: Campbell, Y. et al. (eds). COVID in the Islands: A comparative perspective on the Caribbean and the Pacific. Palgrave.
- Berg, L. & Farbenblum, B.** 2020. As if we weren't human: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19. Migrant Worker Justice Initiative.
- Barry, K. & Iaquinto, B.** 2022. Hostel frictions: backpackers living under lockdown. Mobilities, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17450101.2022.2062256>
- <sup>4</sup> **NFF.** 2022. Jobs Summit yields incremental gains, but a plan to fill 172,000 ag vacancies remains elusive. National Farmers' Federation media release. Available at: <https://nff.org.au/media-release/jobs-summit-yields-incremental-gains-but-a-plan-to-fill-172000-ag-vacancies-remains-elusive/>
- <sup>5</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022a. Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program. Available at: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/whm-program/overview>
- <sup>6</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022b. Working Holiday Maker visa program: WHM visas granted dataset. Available at: <https://data.gov.au/data/dataset/visa-working-holiday-maker>
- <sup>7</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022c. Temporary visa holders in Australia. Dataset. Available at: <https://data.gov.au/data/dataset/temporary-entrants-visa-holders>
- <sup>8</sup> **Dept. Foreign Affairs and Trade.** 2022. The Australian Agriculture Visa. Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/international-labour-mobility/australian-agriculture-visa>
- <sup>9</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022c. Temporary visa holders in Australia.
- <sup>10</sup> **Gibson, J. & Moran, A.** 2020, Apr 3. As coronavirus spreads, 'it's time to go home'... ABC News. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/coronavirus-pm-tells-international-students-time-to-go-to-home/12119568>
- <sup>11</sup> **Former Acting Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs.** 2020, Apr 4. Coronavirus and Temporary Visa holders. Available at: <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/alantudge/Pages/Coronavirus-and-Temporary-Visa-holders.aspx>
- <sup>12</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022c. Temporary visa holders in Australia
- <sup>13</sup> **SBS News.** 2022. Around 40,000 Pacific Island workers approved to work in Australia to fill labour shortages. SBS News. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/around-40-000-pacific-island-workers-approved-to-work-in-australia-to-fill-labour-yf42zbjmh>
- <sup>14</sup> **Curtain, R.** 2022, Oct 13. Brain drain 1: a growing concern. DevPolicy Blog. Available at: <https://devpolicy.org/brain-drain-1-a-growing-concern-20221013/>
- <sup>15</sup> **Petrou, K. & Connell, J.** 2018. "We don't feel free at all": temporary ni-Vanuatu workers in the Riverina, Australia. Rural society, 27(1), 66-79.
- <sup>16</sup> **Barry, K.** 2021. Momentarily immobile: Backpacking, farm work, and hostels. Geographical Research, 59(1), 46-55.
- <sup>17</sup> **Li, Y.** 2021. Asymmetrical understandings of the value of time between Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers and the Australian government. The Sociological Review, 70(3), 547-563.
- <sup>18</sup> **Mares, P.** 2016. Not quite Australian: How temporary migration is changing the nation. Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- <sup>19</sup> **Australian Bureau of Statistics.** 2022. 2021 Census of Population and Housing [TableBuilder]. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/microdata-tablebuilder/tablebuilder>
- <sup>20</sup> **Palace Backpacker Memorial.** n.d. Bundaberg Regional Council. Available at: <https://www.discoverbundaberg.com.au/palace-backpacker-memorial>
- <sup>21</sup> Statistic from 2019, from interview with a representative from Bundaberg Tourism, Sept. 2022.
- <sup>22</sup> **Trade and Investment Queensland.** 2022. Queensland regions. Available at: <https://www.tiq.qld.gov.au/international-business/invest-in-queensland/regions>.
- <sup>23</sup> **Australian Bureau of Statistics.** 2022. 2021 Census All persons QuickStats. Tablelands. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA36820>
- <sup>24</sup> **Fair Work Ombudsman.** 2016. Inquiry into the waves and conditions of people working under the 417 Working Holiday Visa Program. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Berg, L. & Farbenblum, B.** 2017. Wage theft in Australia: Findings of the National Temporary Migrant Work Survey. Available at: <https://www.migrantjustice.org/highlights/2017/11/14/report-released-wage-theft-in-australia-findings-of-the-national-temporary-migrant-work-survey>
- <sup>25</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022c. Temporary visa holders in Australia.

<sup>26</sup> **Wilson, A.** 2020, Feb 21. New visa rules encourage backpackers to help in Australia's bushfire recovery. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/feb/20/new-visa-rules-encourage-backpackers-to-help-in-australias-bushfire-recovery>

<sup>27</sup> **Ramer, R.** 2022, Mar 5. The Pacific Islander seasonal workers helping rebuild Lismore after devastating floods. SBS News. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/meet-the-pacific-islander-seasonal-workers-who-helped-rebuild-lismore-after-floods-devastated-the-community/zvlhgybf6>

<sup>28</sup> **Queensland Health.** 2020. Guideline for the Development of a Health Management Plan: Accommodation and Private or Charter Workforce Transportation Providers. Queensland Health, April 29. [https://www.health.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0033/959910/guideline-risk-mitigation-for-accommodation-transport.pdf](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0033/959910/guideline-risk-mitigation-for-accommodation-transport.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> **Harvest Trail – Workforce Australia.** 2022. AgMove Relocation Assistance. Available at: <https://www.workforceaustralia.gov.au/individuals/coaching/careers/harvest/workers/relocation-assistance>

<sup>30</sup> **Stayner, T.** 2022 July 20. Skilled workers prioritised amid backlog of almost one million visa applications. SBS News. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/skilled-workers-prioritised-amid-backlog-of-almost-one-million-visa-applications/xi6uoobic>

<sup>31</sup> **Dept. Home Affairs.** 2022c. Temporary visa holders in Australia.



# **TURBULENT TIMES: THE STATE OF BACKPACKING AND SEASONAL FARM WORK IN AUSTRALIA**

## **PRELIMINARY REPORT**

January 2023

### **Contact**

Dr Kaya Barry  
[k.barry@griffith.edu.au](mailto:k.barry@griffith.edu.au)  
+61 737357317