

INQUIRY INTO SKILLS SHORTAGES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW

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Theme:

Summary

Also on behalf of Leeton Citrus Growers Inc and Griffith and District Citrus Growers Inc



**Riverina Citrus
Leeton Citrus Growers Inc.
Griffith and District Citrus Growers Inc.**

Submission to

Inquiry into skills shortages in rural and regional NSW.

July 2005

Introduction

The Riverina Citrus is the statutory organisation that represents all citrus growers in the Riverina area of New South Wales.

The riverina citrus industry comprising of 500 producers, 45 citrus packing sheds and 7 citrus juice processors and it is estimated that approximately 30% of all Australia's citrus production is grown in this region with an average total production is of 180,000 tonnes of citrus.

Terms of Reference

1a) The current demand for labour in the citrus industry is increasing from the skilled harvest labour through pruning, thinning, and packing and into advisory roles with trained agronomists and researchers. The cause is a shift from processing focus demand to fresh fruit citrus production. This means more fruit is picked in a shorter harvest window.

While harvested tonnages of the fresh fruit Navel varieties in this region have not dramatically changed over the past 5 years, the demand will increase due to the changes in plantings that take up to six years to come into production. Other south eastern Australian citrus growing regions are also competing for the same labour, with a record navel crop to be harvested in Australia this current season. The estimated number of Australian Navel trees has increased 25% over the past 8 years from 3 million trees to 4 million trees that have to be harvested between March and November (source: Australian Citrus Growers Inc. website)₂.

To overcome the increase demand citrus growers are turning to contractors to supply the skilled labour. For example pg 92 of the Productivity Report 2002 lists employing contractors as an option to manage risk on farm, but then notes the AHEA Inc comment that 'there is limited opportunity to delay harvesting or cold store fruit, without prejudicing shelf life and arrival quality'.

Labour requirements are listed in the Productivity Report 2002 Pg 96 '...the citrus industry is labour intensive.'

This can be summarized within the Productivity report Overview under Impediments to industry performance, page XXXV, Cost and availability of labour "The increasing cost of, and the industry's difficulty in attracting, labour clearly affect the citrus industry..... None the less, government policies in areas such as immigration, workers' compensation and superannuation can place an increasing compliance cost burden on farmers...."₁

The loss of two young, recently trained, advisory staff from the NSW DPI offices in Yanco and Leeton are placing a strain on the system with virtually no citrus advisory staff for the 500 citrus growers in the region, let alone any research being undertaken. The positions have been advertised internally through the NSW DPI, with no suitable applicants at this time.

1b) Economically the impact of the labour shortage is large, but difficult to calculate. Fruit is being left on trees because there is insufficient numbers of skilled harvest laborers to pick it. Just one weeks delay in harvesting can affect the opportunities in export markets with market windows getting shorter and shorter due to competing regions and other countries.

Limited research being undertaken in the region may place the industry five to 10 years behind other regions, rather than leading the way.

Socially this impacts across a wide area. Reduction of people in the local community affects business and services and schools etc. Growers are having to harvest more fruit themselves removing them from managing the business and also from personal time with the family. This leads to long term affects with children seeing how much time and effort their parents are putting into the business and don't wish to return to the family business.

Socially it affects the community with skilled labour being attracted to major regional centres, losing local doctors and dentists, causing growers to travel sometimes up to a day to a regional centre to get basic needs seen to, removing them from their businesses.

1c) Can local government promote, through the local government network the regional work opportunities including facilitate transport and accommodation systems. Transport and accommodation are two areas that are continually mentioned by workers that are of issue to them.

1d)e)f) Government consider issuing visas which are industry and regional specific for a qualifying period that leads to permanent residency.

1h) Where it is shown that there is an acute shortage in a certain field courses for that profession could be heavily subsidized to encourage participation. There is generally a delay in the system between the need arising and courses conducted. The delay is the lag in courses being established and funding to conduct them. There needs to be sufficient recognition for the courses undertaken, so that they are not just looked at as another piece of paper.

Conclusion

While lack of skilled labour may not directly affect orchard management it does affect orchard production in terms of quick access to the skilled labour.

The definition of skilled labour needs to be further addressed. Fruit harvesting does require a skill. While it is a profession that any person can undertake, it is the skilled harvesters that stay in the industry as they are able to make a living from it.

Riverina Citrus, Leeton Citrus Growers Inc., and Griffith and District Citrus Growers Inc. would be prepared to elaborate on any issues raised in this Submission, if this is requested.

Peter Morrish, Executive Officer Riverina Citrus
Victor Nardi, President Leeton Citrus Growers Inc.
Frank Battistel, President, Griffith and District Citrus Growers Inc.

References:

- 1 *Citrus Growing and Process, Inquiry Report, Report No.20 April 2002, Productivity Commission*
- 2 *Australian Citrus Growers Inc. www.australiancitrusgrowers.com.au*

