



Agribusiness

PALM changes ‘rushed’, protests fell on deaf years: Farmers

Producers believe their concerns over “extreme” new labour scheme reforms fell on deaf ears, while the government says it was responding to stakeholder concerns.

Jason Gregory

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 0 comments



Whitney, who predicted the financial crisis, talks about bringing her analysis to a larger audience.

Farm leaders say the federal government rushed through “extreme adjustments” to the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme despite warnings they would render the program commercially unviable for many producers.

The union-endorsed deed of agreement and guidelines changes include paying workers a fixed weekly rate for nine months, pay parity with domestic workers, and portability.

However, industry figures have called on government to reverse the changes to its flagship labour migration program, saying PALM's intent as a temporary circular labour scheme was now muddled and threatened to force farmers from the scheme and, ultimately, some small to medium operations out of business.

NO BREAKTHROUGH IN CONSULTATION TALKS

A key industry figure has told The Weekly Times that a recent 10-day consultation period over the proposed changes began with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations disseminating around 150 pages of “heavily legalistic” draft guidelines and a power point presentation of six specific options for change.



Saulo Ropati from Samoa participated in the PALM scheme. Picture: Adam Head

He said stakeholders “continually” told government during discussions that they were “strongly against” the fixed nine-month contract option but comfortable with averaging payments over four or eight weeks to match the seasonal nature of farming.

“We were given a fair hearing, but whether or not the government were really listening is an open question,” he said.

“Ultimately it felt from the beginning that they had an idea of exactly what they wanted the guidelines to say and that is exactly where we landed. We need more enforcement and cops on the beat, not paperwork and costs.”

The 30-hour-a-week requirement is an existing demand under the program, however new rules change how hours will be calculated. Instead of being averaged over an entire placement of up to nine months, hours will be averaged per week starting from July 1 next year.

Australian Fresh Produce Alliance chief executive Claire McClelland, who made several ill-fated 11th hour pleas with federal ministers to stop the rollout, said the new rules were pushed through following a “rushed” consultation and “despite industry warning they will decrease demand” for PALM workers.

Ms McClelland represents a sector currently employing about 70 per cent of the 37,000 PALM workers currently in the country.

She believes an averaging period of four weeks would both provide workers protection while allowing horticulturalists room to navigate seasonal fluctuations.

“Politicians in Canberra need to understand that there is variability in growing fresh produce, a few hours of heavy rain can make it impossible to access paddocks for several days,” she said.



AusVeg chair Bill Bulmer with seasonal worker Jacinta da Costa from East Timor on his farm near Bairnsdale in East Gippsland. Picture: Aaron Francis/The Australian

CHANGES RESPONSE TO STAKEHOLDER CONCERNS

It is no secret the PALM scheme has been plagued by unsafe working conditions and financial exploitation, [with 17 employers being suspended from the program already this financial year.](#)

A DEWR spokesman said its recent changes were made after “listening to workers and participating countries” and dialogue and sharing of draft changes with producers, including the National Farmers’ Federation and the Australian Fresh Produce Alliance, reaching back to 2021.

“It is a commitment to eliminating exploitation of migrant workers and ensuring a reliable and productive workforce is available when there are not Australian workers to do the job,” he said.

“Even some employers have raised low work hours as a concern that can drive workers to leave the scheme and potentially breach their visa conditions.”

However, the consultations that started in 2021 with the then Morrison Government concluded with industry and government arriving at guidelines acceptable to all parties.

The passing of the changes were then railroaded by last-minute concessional tax changes the Coalition attempted to ram into the deal, and the project was abandoned when the tax tweaks were blocked by the Greens in the Senate and the government went into caretaker mode.

This means, according to those involved, that the recent consultations were more fresh conversations and not the end of a lengthy dialogue.

SCHEME HAS DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY

The government stresses that PALM should not be treated as a single solution, however the agriculture industry claims to be 170,000 workers short and now has few, if any, alternative avenues to source them beyond the Pacific particularly given the working holiday visa will next year have specified requirements to do farm work removed.

The Albanese government has said it will push on regardless with its plan to solve agriculture’s labour crisis with workers from the region, its intent as much on worker shortages as satisfying its need for soft diplomacy and national security with regional neighbours.

Meanwhile, the NFF continues to call for workers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to be included in the scheme, as they were in the so-called Ag Visa introduced by the Coalition but scrapped by Labor before it became operational.



Matt Palise of Red Rich Fruits.

The group says a scheme open only to Pacific nations will not deliver workers at the pace, or in the skills and long-term numbers, it needs.

As it stands, AusVeg chairman Bill Bulmer, who wants 30 hours averaged over eight weeks, said the “inadequate” PALM consultations led to changes that are a “lose-lose-lose” situation for workers, growers and consumers.

“Without an ag visa or harvest visa, and with the drop of working holiday-makers during Covid, growers have been increasingly reliant on the PALM scheme,” he said.

“The horticulture industry has led the charge with PALM as its major employer and advocate, but this will be undermined if it is no longer fit for purpose”.

CHANGES ‘NAIL IN THE COFFIN’ FOR MUM AND DAD PRODUCERS

Red Rich Fruits managing director Matt Palise went a step further, saying that the changes could be the “final nail in the coffin” for many small Australian farmer operations, while facilitating the growth of larger businesses able to absorb the program’s new wage guarantee arrangements.



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“Smaller to medium businesses will have to be more selective from where they source workers because of the new guarantees, despite already struggling to attract workers,” he said.

“Farm leaders have been asking for help in managing the PALM scheme, but these changes have pretty much just made it impossible for any small farmer, and they make up a big chunk of the industry.

“For the larger farmers it is okay because we can guarantee the work and we can sustain the burden, (but) mum and dad farms now, it was already a difficult scheme for them to access anyway, for housing, transportation, and the guaranteed hours.”

Stakeholders have also said the government’s use of PALM to build relations with Pacific partners through job creation and the money those workers send home may become compromised by an employer exit.

But that may not be the case should bigger producers simply get bigger at the expense of ‘mum and dad’ farms.

Meanwhile, it was not all bad news for the industry, with small victories from the PALM talks including the government agreeing to increase welfare support for workers, reducing accommodation demands and extending the implementation into 2024.

A ray of hope could also be talk that PALM may be expanded to include New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea in coming years.

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‘Final nail in coffin’ for labour scheme after changes

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