

MIGRATION PATHWAYS

Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP)

Overview

The Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) was established in 2012 to provide seasonal horticultural opportunities to workers from eight Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste. After a slow start, in 2015 the program removed both the cap on workers and the demand-side constraints on employers, accelerating take-up. The program expects to bring in 37,500 workers a year by 2030.

Why was it started?

The Australian horticultural sector has been rapidly growing for decades. Given the remote, difficult, and seasonal nature of the work, it has increasingly relied on temporary labor to staff skill shortages.

In 2008–12, the Australian government implemented the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme (PSWPS) to match this need with Pacific labor. Despite low take-up, it decided to expand the scheme to new countries and new sectors in 2012.

How does it work?

The program permits workers from eight Pacific Island countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste to access visas that allow stays of up to nine months. Workers are not allowed to bring their dependents. They are allowed to return for future seasons.

Countries all around the world utilize migration pathways to train and bring over workers with needed skills. The CGD Migration Pathways database documents these pathways to promote innovation in this space. To explore the database, visit GSP.cgdev.org.



Country of Destination
AUSTRALIA

Country of Origin
**FIJI, KIRIBATI, NAURU, PAPUA
NEW GUINEA, SAMOA, THE
SOLOMON ISLANDS, TIMOR-
LESTE, TONGA, TUVALU, AND
VANUATU**

Skill
**HORTICULTURE,
AQUACULTURE, COTTON,
CANE, AND BROADER
AGRICULTURE** (🌾)

Skill Level
LOW

Timeline
2012–ONGOING

Beneficiaries
12,000 A YEAR (UNCAPPED)

Originally, the program was piloted in five sectors (horticulture, accommodation, aquaculture, cotton, and sugarcane) and had a cap of 12,000 people a year. The cap was eventually dropped.

The Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) are responsible for selecting approved employers, who can be growers or labor-hire companies. Approved employers are responsible for sourcing workers; guaranteeing work at Australian standards; helping the workers access healthcare, pastoral care, and legal redress; and supporting visa compliance issues.

What impact has it had?

Initially, demand for the program was weak. In fiscal year 2013/14, only 1,473 workers were recruited—far fewer than the cap of 2,000. Lack of awareness of the scheme; red tape, which discouraged employer involvement; and the presence of illegal workers and backpackers willing to work in the fields reduced demand for the program. Legal labor migrants were found to be 20 percent more productive than illegal workers and backpackers, but hiring them was costlier and involved greater risks.

In 2015, the Australian government addressed some of these constraints and removed the worker cap. Since then, the number of workers coming in under the scheme has rapidly increased. In 2019–20, 12,000 people arrived; 37,500 a year are expected by 2030. A 2017 report found that 65 percent of workers were

not employed in their countries of origin before the scheme. The program thus represented a substantial increase in income for their families. About 86 percent of workers remitted money home, sending a total of AUD\$144 million. Tonga earned twice as much in remittances as it received in aid from the Australian budget.

Further readings

Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment. 2020. “Seasonal Worker Programme.” <https://www.employment.gov.au/seasonal-worker-programme>

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Doyle, J., and S. Howes. 2015. *Australia’s Seasonal Worker Program: Demand-side constraints and suggested reforms*. World Bank Group and Australian National University. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/21491>

Doyle, J., and M. Sharma. 2017. *Maximizing the development impacts from temporary migration recommendations for Australia’s Seasonal Worker Programme*. World Bank Group, Washington, DC. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/572391522153097172/pdf/122270-repl-PUBLIC.pdf>



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