

15 December 2023

Ms Robyn Kruk AO, Professor Catherine Bennett, Dr Angela Jackson  
Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Via submission

**NFF SUBMISSION — COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT COVID-19 RESPONSE  
INQUIRY**

Dear Madame Chair,

The National Farmers' Federation (**the NFF**) thanks the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for this opportunity to make a submission on the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and, more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and the length of the supply chain. Operating as a federation structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

As one of the largest industries in country, agriculture was vital in Australia's ability to withstand the complications posed by COVID-19. Whilst much of the country was in lockdown, agriculture, to the best of its ability, continued to provide for the nation.

Regarding this inquiry, the NFF would like to bring the panel's attention to the following issues in relation to the farm workforce and access to labour:

- Domestic and international border closures, and
- The utilisation of Pacific workers in the agricultural sector.

Domestic and international border closures posed significant difficulties to the agricultural sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. The movement of workers, equipment, and stock was heavily impacted by the Federal Government's decision to limit interstate and international travel. Over half of the overseas workers who found work on Australian farm were not allowed to enter the country due to the differing quarantine rules in each state. The choice to limit free movement over domestic borders also caused many agricultural services staff to refuse harvesting contracts due to the necessity to travel interstate. These two factors contributed to a severe shortage in agricultural workers, leading to significant loss in the industry.

Moreover, the closure of domestic borders meant that there was significant difficulty transporting agricultural products, plant and equipment between states during harvest season. This posed a particular difficulty for those farmers whose properties were spread across state borders.

In general, the lack of understanding of decision makers in Canberra appeared to have around the agricultural industry led to the greatest amount of difficulty. Agriculture, being an outdoors and low risk industry, was subject to restrictions that the NFF and its members do not believe were necessary, particularly the closure of borders.

Conversely, the NFF welcomed the restart and reinvigoration of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme that took place during the pandemic. The lack of Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) coming to Australia during the pandemic led the then Government to seek alternative sources of labour for the horticulture industry. This brought the Government's focus to the PALM Scheme, which prior to COVID-19 had only around 7,140 workers working on horticulture farms in Australia.

It needs to be said that the restart was not the panacea some may have taken it to be, given that for the most part, it only largely served the horticulture sector. While there may have been a few PALM workers outside horticulture, by-and-large the other commodities – such as grains, wool production, cotton, etc. – were left struggling to find workers.

It should also be observed that government could have done more to support uptake of the scheme. We were especially disappointed at some of the finger pointing between state and federal governments. To industry, it appeared that federalism was used as an excuse to avoid taking responsibility, properly governing, and making decisions.

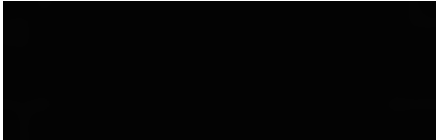
Nevertheless, the fact remains that the PALM restart was fundamental to the success (and, from some perspectives) survival of the horticulture industry during the period. At the height of COVID-19, the number of PALM Scheme workers working in horticultural or agricultural farms had doubled to over 14,900 workers. Now the Scheme boasts to around 26,196 workers working on horticultural or agricultural farms, with over 38,145 PALM workers working across care, agriculture, hospitality, and meat sectors.

One of the positive outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic was the refocus of the government onto labour requirements in the agricultural industry. This scheme not only offered a great benefit to Australian farmers but also provided much needed financial assistance to Pacific nations who were struggling during the pandemic.

In summary, while the NFF and its members are pleased with the reinvigoration of the PALM Scheme, we believe that many other measures taken by the Federal Government during the pandemic were unnecessary and ill-informed. Better consultation and understanding with and of the agricultural industry would have assisted the Government in making more reasoned decisions in relation to COVID-19 restrictions.

The NFF would like to thank the panel for giving us to make our submission on behalf of our members,

Yours Sincerely



Tony Mahar  
CEO  
National Farmers Federation