

The Australian Government responds to the Seasonal Worker Program inquiry

By Henry Sherrell
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In May 2016, the Joint Standing Committee on Migration completed [a report](#) into the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP). The bipartisan committee recommended the consideration of an expansion into new sectors such as aged and child care as well as a review into backpackers and seasonal workers in the horticultural industry.

In [responding to the inquiry](#), the Turnbull Government has rejected both of these recommendations. On the potential expansion, the government states, “the skills requirements and lack of seasonal peaks in demand in the aged, child and disability care sector go beyond the parameters of the Seasonal Worker Programme” and instead highlight the introduction of the Microstate visa as an alternative migration pathway.

It is difficult to argue with the government’s logic that the needs of the ‘aged, child and disability care sectors’ are beyond the scope of the SWP. None of these industries are seasonal in nature. Substantial regulatory changes would be required for an appropriate framework to allow employer sponsorship of Pacific migrants in those sectors. Pending the announcement of a new visa pathway, the use of bespoke labour agreements or an expansion of the Microstate visa, it is difficult to see how the status quo can provide access for new industries to sponsor Pacific migrants.

On the recommendation for an additional review, the government states, “a number of comprehensive reviews into these programmes have either been completed or are currently underway” noting the [Migrant Workers Taskforce](#), the [Northern Australia White Paper](#) and the recently completed [Working Holiday Maker review](#).

Another review will not solve the central problem already identified by a number of reports and inquiries. The issues are well known. Backpackers outnumber seasonal workers [at least ten to one](#) and outcompete seasonal workers because of the lack of a level playing field (for example, market testing is required for seasonal workers but not backpackers). Although [recent growth](#) of the SWP is encouraging, the failure of the Committee to tackle this [fundamental issue](#) meant that there was little sensible for the government to respond to.

About the author/s

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