

Tongan RSE workers waiting for rescue during Cyclone Gabrielle



Cyclone Gabrielle: Pacific seasonal workers picking up the pieces in New Zealand

By Charlotte Bedford
1 March 2023

When Tropical Cyclone Gabrielle descended on the north and eastern coasts of New Zealand's North Island between 12 and 14 February, the timing could not have been worse. In Hawke's Bay – the country's largest pipfruit-growing region, producing 62% of New Zealand's apples and pears at an [export value of approximately NZ\\$830 million](#) – the peak apple harvest period was about to start. To support the harvest, around 3,350 seasonal workers, employed on contracts for up to seven months under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, were in the region.

The category 3 storm, [described by the Head of Weather Communications](#) in the national meteorological service as “one of the worst storms to hit Aotearoa New Zealand in living history”, brought unprecedented rain and strong winds to the region, causing extensive damage to infrastructure, roads and housing. Orchards, vineyards and farms producing apples, stonefruit, grapes and vegetables were flooded; trees, vines and crops were uprooted and washed away. For some horticulture and viticulture producers, years of investment – including expanded areas under planting, technological innovations, and investments in purpose-built RSE worker accommodation – were wiped out. Three large RSE employers were particularly badly affected, sustaining extensive damage to orchards and the loss of around 500 RSE beds between them.

Severe flooding caused the displacement of around 800 RSE workers from their accommodation. Media coverage showed a group of [Tongan RSE workers stranded for hours](#) on their rooftops before being rescued, leaving with nothing but a rubbish bag full of possessions. Workers were evacuated to civil defence centres, or housed with local churches, on marae or with community organisations, with the National Emergency Management Agency coordinating support on the ground.

For RSE stakeholders, including employers, industry representatives, Pacific liaison officers,

and government officials, lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic response – about the importance of working collaboratively, and the need for flexibility, responsiveness and adaptation to ever-changing circumstances – have been invaluable when responding to the latest crisis. Relief efforts are being led by industry groups, with daily online meetings with government officials to coordinate the response, which is designed to ensure the needs of RSE workers are prioritised and met.

In the immediate aftermath of the cyclone, industry and government worked closely to locate all Hawke's Bay-based RSE employers and their workers to ensure their safety and then, where feasible, to facilitate workers' return to their RSE accommodation. Civil defence centres and local Pacific churches were inundated with donations of food, clothing and other goods for those who had been evacuated and lost their belongings. Community groups made extensive use of social media to raise awareness of what goods needed to be donated, such as mobile phones to enable workers to contact family members at home. As soon as it was safe to do so, [RSE workers in affected areas began to help with the clean-up](#), clearing debris, checking houses and helping to search for those still unaccounted for.

By Monday 20 February, almost a week after the cyclone hit the region, close to 90% of the approximately 3,350 RSE workers in the Hawke's Bay area were able to return to suitable accommodation – either their original accommodation or other pre-approved RSE housing.

RSE employers remain responsible for their workers' welfare and pastoral care, and are required to continue paying workers for a [minimum of 30 hours per week at \\$22.10 per hour](#), including those who have sustained extensive damage to their orchards. Immigration NZ is introducing some flexibility to RSE visa settings to help ensure RSE employers can meet their obligations and keep workers in full-time employment. This includes flexibility in start and end dates of workers' contracts enabling workers to be more easily shifted between different RSE employers, and expanding the types of tasks that can be performed in horticulture and viticulture work beyond planting, packing, maintaining and harvesting.

The ability to shift workers to other regions is also available, but the message from Hawke's Bay producers is that there is enough employment for RSE workers in the region – either picking apples or maintenance tasks, including cyclone clean-up – for RSE employers to ensure workers receive their guaranteed 30 hours of work per week. While the cyclone caused [extensive damage to some orchards and farms, other areas remain unscathed](#). With a large apple crop still to be harvested for export, the focus now is on getting a good quality crop picked and packed.

RSE workers' health and safety as they return to work to assist the recovery and the apple

harvest is a priority for industry. A large shipment of personal protective equipment has been delivered to the region by the Navy, providing workers with protective gloves and masks for orchard and clean-up work. The Hawke's Bay District Health Board's Pacific team is providing psychosocial support for workers (and employers), offering to visit workers in their accommodation in the evenings if needed. Industry groups are looking at whether some funding may be available for workers who lost all of their possessions in the cyclone.

An [interim NZ\\$50 million relief package](#) for cyclone-affected regions has been endorsed by government, with support available to businesses and the primary sectors. This includes [NZ\\$25 million for recovery grants](#) to assist farmers and growers to undertake urgent work, including clearing silt to save fruit trees and vines, and discretionary funding for business continuity and support for resiliency and mental wellbeing.

Industry is also lobbying government for the introduction of a wage subsidy for growers' New Zealand staff and RSE employees. The subsidy will be especially important for some of the smaller, family-owned enterprises that have sustained damage and have limited means to cover their costs.

The economic cost of the cyclone to the Hawke's Bay region and to the horticulture and viticulture industries is yet to be quantified. Similarly, the longer term implications for horticultural production have yet to become clear. Some rationalisation of the industry may occur as smaller enterprises, unable to bear the costs of replanting and rebuilding, withdraw from the sector. Possible flow-on effects to the RSE scheme's operation may also happen.

What is immediately evident, however, is that the [damage to some properties and livelihoods will take years to repair](#). Growers cannot insure their trees – claims can only be made for fruit that is picked and in the packhouse. For some who have had their orchards wiped out, they will be starting their operations from scratch, which can cost millions. As one orchardist explained: "If you lose your trees you lose your income for this year and for next year and for the year after that and the year after. It's probably a seven-year workaround to get into production again."

Orchardists are used to dealing with both the vagaries of the weather and the market for their crops, but the devastation caused by Cyclone Gabrielle will challenge their abilities to adapt on a different scale. Whether small and medium-sized horticulture enterprises, which comprise the great majority of RSE employers, are able to recover from this latest disaster, and continue to recruit their seasonal workers from the Pacific, remains to be seen.

In the immediate future, the focus is on the harvest and getting fruit off the trees. For RSE

employers, their workers, and other key players in the RSE system, working together to replant and rebuild, and being able to respond and adapt to change, will remain cornerstones of the RSE policy's daily operation for some time yet.

Disclosure

This research was supported by the [Pacific Research Program](#), with funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the author only.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/cyclone-gabrielle-pacific-seasonal-workers-pick-up-the-pieces-in-nz-20230301/>

Date downloaded: 20 April 2024



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