



Family accompaniment: divided employer views

By Evie Sharman and Stephen Howes
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This year, Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme will start to allow long-term PALM workers – those working in Australia between one and four years – to bring their families.

So far, few details have been released of how this important reform will work. [More than half of long-term Pacific workers](#) have a partner at home, and informal feedback suggests that many would bring their family to Australia given the opportunity to do so.

The Australian government has stated that [employer agreement will be required](#) for family accompaniment to occur. So, what are employers and industry groups thinking? Submissions to a [recent government consultation process](#) are revealing.

Some 70% of long-term PALM workers are employed in meat processing, so what these employers think is particularly important. The Australian Meat Industry Council (AMIC) seems positively disposed. Its [submission notes that the sector](#) would be “well placed to support families accompanying workers”.

By contrast, the submission from the Approved Employers of Australia (AEA), the main representative body for PALM employers, is more negative. Noting practical issues around “accommodation, healthcare, education”, its [submission provides in-principle support](#), but is sceptical about the feasibility in practice. The AEA submission highlights the importance of managing expectations, notes the tension that might arise if secondary visa holders have less restrictive employment rights than PALM workers, and argues for a six-month pilot.

Why is AEA more cautious when the industry that hires the most long-term PALM workers is positive about family accompaniment? The answer lies in the fact that AEA has to represent all its members. About 20% of the long-term PALM workers are in horticulture, and farming groups have been less supportive. For example, peak body AUSVEG in its [submission “does not support the family accompaniment reform”](#) for a variety of reasons, ranging from the high costs of living to accommodation shortages and the anticipated reduction in

remittances.

Why is there a difference between the meat and horticulture sectors? The meat industry is used to hiring meatworkers under its Meat Industry Labour Agreement (MILA), which allows it special access to the Temporary Skill Shortage visa (TSS), and TSS workers are allowed to bring their families. Abattoirs are usually not as remote as some farms, and being based in regional centres means most families will have better accommodation and schooling options. Farmers are used to relying on single backpackers and unaccompanied Pacific workers, and don't want the hassle of an accompanying family. Abattoir employers are confident that they can provide work for accompanying partners; horticultural employers may not be so sure.

How seriously should we take the reservations expressed by the horticultural sector? More generally, what should be the role of the employer when it comes to family accompaniment? There are at least two big issues that need to be unpacked.

The first concerns employer veto. During the initial pilot phase, it makes sense to work with willing employers. But once the pilot is over, employers should not be able to withhold consent unreasonably; there need to be clear guidelines on the circumstances under which families are disallowed.

Under the TSS, a worker can bring their family, but if they don't initially, [written agreement is required from the employer](#). From what we can tell, it is expected that the employer will provide the consent letter. A similar arrangement should apply to long-term PALM workers, rather than an unlimited employer veto. The employer should have to convince the government that it is not feasible to allow families to accompany workers, as an "opt out" rather than "opt-in". An employer veto should only be for a small number of practical, workplace-wide considerations, such as the availability of accommodation and schooling.

Employers should not, as much as they want one, have a veto on the basis of the worker's character. The AUSVEG submission suggested that family accompaniment be conditional on factors such as "good character" and having "a positive, hardworking attitude". AMIC's submission also mentioned "appropriate workplace behaviours" and "good attendance" as relevant criteria, and said that family accompaniment should be managed "on a case by case basis by employers".

However, perceived workplace issues should be resolved in the workplace, and not used to deny a basic human right such as family accompaniment. If one worker in a workplace is allowed to bring their family, then all should be. Family accompaniment should not be used as a reward for a chosen few.

The second question is whether employers should have any responsibility for the accompanying family, and if not, what the role of other parties will be. Unlike sponsors of other visa classes, PALM employers have significant formal and informal welfare responsibilities to workers. It is unclear what, if any, of these would and should extend to workers' families.

Under the MILA, employers do not have the same level of pastoral responsibilities for workers or their families. However, under the AMIC proposal of "similar conditions ... as the current Meat Industry Labour Agreement conditions", employers would pay return domestic and international travel costs at the end of placements for the whole family to return home.

While issues are still to be resolved, it seems – from the [brief statement so far released by government](#) – that most, if not all, family migration costs will be borne by workers, with some support from government. This reinforces the conclusion that the [principal decision maker regarding family accompaniment](#) should be the worker and their family.

Not all employers will be happy with such an approach, but the good news is that the meat processing body seems positive about family accompaniment, and they hire the majority of PALM's long-term workers.

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