

Solutions needed to build workforce

POTATOES SA
By **ROBBIE DAVIS, CEO**

THE South Australian potato industry is not unique in its requirement of an adequately and appropriately skilled workforce.

The horticulture and agriculture industries are obviously located in regional and rural areas and the attraction to, and retention of, quality staff in these areas remains challenging, if not limiting to the sustainability of individual businesses.

Despite company-wide strategies, such as in-house training, increased advertising of positions and increased wages, positions are not being filled by under or unemployed Australians.

The answer lies in a targeted immigration policy for SA.

The skills shortages are across the value chain from production to despatch at retail destinations.

Potatoes SA is working with Migration Solutions' Mark Glazbrook to solve this problem.

What makes immigration reform in SA and other re-

gional and low population growth jurisdictions difficult is a focus on big city migration. We simply do not face the same concerns as Sydney and Melbourne.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows net overseas migration in Vic, NSW, Qld and WA was 92.6 per cent of the total 262,489, while NOM in SA, Tas, the NT and the ACT was only 7.4pc.

There is little doubt that broadly reducing NOM to stop or curtail the population and congestion issues in Melbourne and Sydney will have a detrimental impact on local and regional businesses and communities in SA and other similar jurisdictions if a blanket approach is adopted by the Department of Home Affairs.

The population growth, migration outcomes and increased NOM in Vic and NSW, which makes up 75pc of all NOM figures, is a direct result of poor government policy and lack of strategically developed migration programs addressing the de-

mands and needs of regional and low population growth jurisdictions of Australia.

If there is not broad reform of the Australian migration program, it is only three to five years until the overall population of SA is likely to start declining.

Regional depopulation is also a significant concern for rural SA. Last year regional populations declined, while this year there was a return to a slightly positive result.

But what will happen to regional SA and our key industry sectors if access to labour and appropriate address of the unmet demand for labour is denied?

Recent immigration changes introduced in March in addition to the introduction of the 482 visa replacing the 457 visa can only exacerbate this.

The challenges include:

- An ageing population
- Persistently lower population growth
- High unemployment, but unemployed not relocating to regional areas
- Weaker economic



Despite many attempts to fill rural job positions, these are not being filled by under or unemployed Australians.



Potatoes SA covers seed producers, growers, processors, packers, marketers, exporters, wholesalers and retailers.

- conditions
- Finding skilled labour and less skilled migrants
- Industry unable to fill skilled and semi-skilled positions in regional areas
- Succession planning
- Net exodus of skilled educated young people interstate
- Less people living in regional areas than 12 months ago
- A time lag between

developing training programs and providing job ready candidates.

Regional Australia needs population growth to fuel demand, stimulate economic growth and address depopulation in regional areas. It is not about putting foreign workers before a local workforce - there just is not a suitable local workforce.

A migration program needs to be recalibrated, not cut, to facilitate economic growth in our regions and grow rural communities again. Individual companies are seeking labour agreements, which may be supported by an industry-wide agreement benefiting all stakeholders.