

## SA GROWER

# Workforce issues hit hard



Finding large numbers of workers to harvest produce for concentrated short periods of time is proving impossible for some in the horticulture industry.

## POTATOES SA

BY ROBBIE DAVIS, CEO

I WRITE about the issue of workforce shortages frequently but apart from biosecurity, it is the most challenging aspect of agriculture and horticulture, both in terms of prohibitive costs and availability.

Recent research from the National Farmers' Federation has found that Australian farms, particularly in the horticulture sector, are losing as much as \$2 million each year due to crippling workforce shortages.

Produce is not being harvested as the attraction and retention of large numbers of low-skilled workers - often backpackers - for concentrated short periods of time is proving impossible.

The 2019 Farm Workforce Survey clearly demonstrates that labour shortages affect farm businesses' direct and indirect costs.

Annual employment costs for most primary producers range between \$100,000 and \$500,000 and in some cases almost \$2m.

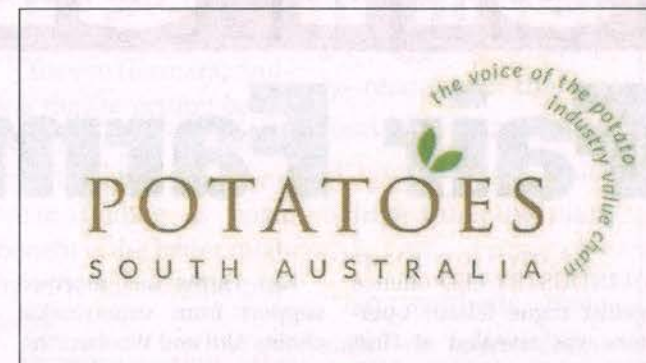
The answer to shortag-

es of skilled and unskilled workers lies in immigration. The most common visas for international workers are the working holidaymaker visa and the seasonal worker program, but neither can meet agriculture's labour needs. The alternative is hiring workers directly or through labour-hire companies.

Consequently, the NFF is lobbying for an agriculture-specific visa to match international workers with harvest positions. At the heart of the agricultural visa program would be building a long-term farm workforce, including pathways to permanent residency for successful ag visa holders and their families.

In March this year, SA Premier Steven Marshall signed a new Designated Area Migration Agreement with the federal government, aimed at bringing skilled migrants to the regions to help fill the skills shortage facing regional SA. How will this agreement work with the other visas?

In early July, I attended Regions Rising 2019 as a guest of Regional Australia



Potatoes SA is the voice for seed producers, growers, fresh market, packers, processors, marketers, exporters, wholesales and retailers.

Institute co-chief executive officer Liz Ritchie.

Here, Primary Industries and Regional Development Minister Tim Whetstone launched the new migration toolkit *Steps to Settlement Success*, a resource sharing lessons learned by communities that have successfully welcomed migrants to help fill job vacancies. How will this fit?

And then, later in July, I was invited by Skills Impact to participate in the Agriculture and Production Horticulture Industry Reference Committee's Subject Matter Expert Working Group - Biosecurity and Emergency

Response Project. This is where the workforce and biosecurity actually collide.

The aim is to review the AHC Agriculture and Production Horticulture training package and specifically components within biosecurity and biosecurity emergency response sectors.

It is clear that there are significant gaps in the understanding of the relevance of biosecurity across the value chain.

It is also very clear that there are very significant gaps in our workforce, both skilled and unskilled. Biosecurity is just one of the casualties.