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Make it rain people: tackling the rural skills drought

The shortage of personnel in the agriculture sector is occurring just at the time when growth in global demand for agricultural products is exceeding supply, and opportunities are expanding for Australian agriculture. So how should the sector respond to the short and long-term challenge of attracting and keeping workers?

The August version of the *Farm Policy Journal* by the Australian Farm Institute addresses this very question, with a range of papers from the perspectives of education, communication and immigration. A reflection of short-term labour supply constraints and long-term factors such as declining rural populations and the expansion of highly-paid employment opportunities in the services and mining sectors; the papers identify a range of strategies to tackle the rural skills drought.

“Future innovation and productivity in the Australian agriculture sector will be dependent on the availability of high quality graduates, however with an estimated demand for 2,000 new graduates in the sector every year and only 800 students graduating; agriculture faces a serious challenge in turning these trends around,” explained Mick Keogh, Executive Director of the Institute.

“Adverse seasonal and market conditions in recent years have fostered a generally negative perception in the community about careers in agriculture, despite the reality that these roles are global in nature and work to address some of the major issues facing the world’s population: food security and environmental degradation.”

The Australian Government recently announced a pilot seasonal worker program in Australia to assist the labour shortage in the horticulture industry. “One of the papers included in this edition of the *Farm Policy Journal* examines experiences arising from seasonal worker programs in New Zealand, identifying a complex array of issues that need careful consideration in the implementation of these schemes,” said Mr Keogh.

“Identification and recruitment processes, pre-employment briefings, appropriate regulatory arrangements, engagement with community groups in target regions within Australia are all considerations for policy makers. In terms of attracting the current generation of prospective employees, the industry needs to consider that these participants don’t necessarily think in long-term careers, and are products of an environment where rapid change is a fact of life.

“In short, there’s no magic silver bullet that will suddenly result in more people seeking long-term careers in the agriculture sector; but there are a range of strategies individual businesses and the industry can adopt in response to the challenge of shortage of workers.”

The August edition of the *Farm Policy Journal: Who will mind the farm? Tackling the rural skills shortage* is available on the Australian Farm Institute website www.farminstitute.org.au or by phoning (02) 9690 1388.

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