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Agricultural labour shortages set to worsen in the future

Australian agriculture faces a current labour shortage of at least 96,000 full-time workers and 10,000 part-time workers, and future projections of labour supply and demand for the sector show no signs of this shortage being reduced over the next decade unless action is taken on a number of fronts.

This is the key finding arising from a new study, *'Towards a Better Understanding of Current and Future Human Resource Needs of Australian Agriculture'*, released today by the Australian Farm Institute. The research concluded that if the sector continues on a business-as-usual course over the next decade, the current shortage of available labour will continue to worsen, driving up labour costs and limiting future growth in the sector. The research concluded that if the sector continues on a business-as-usual course over the next decade, the current shortage of available labour will continue to worsen, driving up labour costs and limiting future growth in the sector.

Competing demand for regional labour supplies from the mining sector, and the generally poor perceptions of careers in agriculture are major negative factors which reduce the number of new entrants seeking careers in the sector.

A further factor which discourages new entrants from entering the sector is the lack of defined career paths, and the indifferent attitude employers in the sector seem to have towards helping employees undertake additional education or training.

Executive Director of the Institute, Mick Keogh, explained that the research, jointly funded by Horticulture Australia, Agrifood Skills Australia and the Institute, involved a detailed examination of labour demand and supply statistics for the agriculture sector, an industry survey, and the development of future labour and demand supply scenarios over the next decade.

"Given the reliance that many agricultural businesses now have on technology and complex management systems, there is an obvious need for a better educated and trained workforce, which will also help the sector to maintain productivity growth in the future," Mr. Keogh said.

"The horticulture sector also has a growing need for seasonal workers during harvest periods, but available statistics do not identify this adequately. The research concludes that one way to start to solve seasonal worker shortfalls is to collect better data about the location and the extent of seasonal labour shortages. This would enable better-targeted responses to be developed in a timely manner.

"A key issue that emerged from the research was the poor quality of statistics that are available to the industry which would help in future workforce planning.

"Official employment statistics for the sector use categorisations that do not meet the needs of the sector, making it difficult to properly understand labour supply and demand trends. In addition, official statistics do not adequately reflect seasonal labour supply and demand, which is a major issue in the horticulture industries. Adding to the confusion, higher education authorities use different categorisations for enrollments and completions, and include a wide range of environmental and other courses in the agriculture data, making it very difficult to determine actual numbers of agricultural graduates.

"It is very difficult for the sector to develop comprehensive programs to improve labour supply, when the available employment and training data is so poor," Mr. Keogh concluded.

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