SPEECH

Thursday, 5 May 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mrs MARKUS (Macquarie) (10:49): On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration, I present the committee’s report of the inquiry into the Seasonal Worker Program entitled *Seasonal change*.

Report made a parliamentary paper in accordance with standing order 39(e).

Mrs MARKUS: by leave—It gives me great pleasure to present the committee's report for its inquiry into the Seasonal Worker Program. The Seasonal Worker Program is extremely important to the developing nations of the Pacific islands and Timor Leste as well as the Australian horticultural and agricultural industries. It assists these nations by providing valuable employment opportunities, economic development through remittances, and new skills and training for seasonal workers. It also supports the Australian horticulture industry by filling a significant industry labour shortage with hardworking, reliable and productive employees.

While this is a valuable program providing job opportunities for Australians, particularly in the areas of labour shortages, there appear to be poor perceptions surrounding the agriculture industry—in particular, that it lacks viable career pathways. More needs to be done to change this misconception and to support youth employment pathways.

That is why the committee has recommended the Australian government allocate funds to establish a three-year pilot program for 17- to 24-year-olds to train and work in the agricultural sector, a Future Force, similar to the model of the Green Army Program, with appropriate adjustments. Overall, submitters were very supportive of the program and its objective to contribute to economic development and support Australian employers in the horticultural sector.

However, the committee received evidence that there were a number of impediments preventing the program from reaching its full potential. Most notably is the horticultural industry's significant reliance on working holiday maker visa holders. Over 41,000 second working holiday visas were granted in the last financial year, 2014-15, and over 92 per cent indicated they had engaged in agricultural work.

While the impetus to establish the working holiday visa is for cultural exchange, the reality is it fills a significant labour gap within the industry and it has been asserted that is in competition with the Seasonal Worker Program. The committee has therefore recommended that the Australian government undertake a comprehensive review of the changes to the seasonal worker and holiday maker programs by December 2017 to ensure they are meeting their stated goals and not adversely impacting on each other or the local labour market.

Female participation in the program remains very low, at only 13 per cent of participation in the last financial year. Gender equality and empowering women has been shown to contribute to economic growth, development, stability and poverty reduction. The committee has made a number of recommendations aimed at increasing gender equality and providing women with greater employment opportunities.

The committee also recommended that the Australian government standardise labour market testing requirements across the range of temporary work visas, undertake a review of current superannuation requirements for Seasonal Worker Program participants and consider expanding the program to the aged-care, childcare and disability care sectors, as has already happened in the north of Australia. The committee recommends that the Seasonal Worker Program provide an employment pathway for Australia Pacific Technical College graduates.

I would sincerely like to thank all the stakeholders, particularly the governments of Seasonal Worker Program participating countries, approved employers and growers, peak bodies, government departments, academics, unions that presented, and organisations and individuals, for their time in preparing submissions and appearing at public hearings. I would also like to thank my hardworking committee colleagues for participating in this inquiry. I would particularly like to thank the deputy chair, Maria Vamvakinou. She and I have been chairing
or deputy chairing this committee for some time now. I would also like to thank Jerome Brown, the committee secretary, and Paul Zinkel, the inquiry secretary.

The report was very insightful. There have been a number of challenges, as we heard, particularly in the last 12 months, around labour market hire companies and their work in the agricultural sector. This was an issue that was particularly raised with us. While the compliance and other settings around the Seasonal Worker Program are very strict and we are seeing employers choosing the Seasonal Worker Program as a better, safer, more reliable option with more integrity, we did hear about some issues. The government has taken serious action through Taskforce Cadena and other measures to ensure workers in the agricultural sector are treated fairly and receive all their work entitlements. I move:

That the House take note of the report.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Broadbent): The debate is adjourned in accordance with standing order 39. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.