

FARM BUSINESS FACT SHEET

FARM LABOUR

September 2016

Employing seasonal farm labour for Western Australia's grains industry

Key points

- Technology has reduced the demand for labour on the land; however, there will always be a need for low-skilled, seasonal workers.
- The Working Holiday Visa Scheme provides short-stay workers, however, it is not a perfect system.
- Attracting, training and retaining seasonal workers (aka backpackers) is a challenge that WA grain growers will continue to face.
- Effective communication and easily repeatable induction processes are critical.

PHOTO: LEY WEBSTER



A simple machinery maintenance induction session is invaluable.

As primary production in Western Australia has evolved and technology has progressed, the need for full-time equivalent (FTE) staff has continued to decline, and that smaller pool of workers is needed to do increasingly sophisticated tasks.

Even as agricultural labour requirements have dramatically dropped away, finding suitable people to fill the vital roles that remain is a continual challenge.

Over recent years there has been a sharp decline in the number of WA farm families raising children who aspire to a career on the land. While the mining sector provided strong competition for potential workers, as that boom passed many of those tempted away from the farm have failed to return.

For many farm business enterprises,

a small local group of dedicated, technically proficient workers, who will remain on-farm even during off-season times will continue to be the backbone of WA agriculture. However the seasonal nature of our industry means that reliable workforce will need to be supplemented every year.

The traditional challenges faced by WA grain growers of distance, isolation, and lack of access to infrastructure and communications are also significant disadvantages when it comes to recruiting a motivated workforce.

The need to attract, train and retain seasonal workers (aka backpackers) to perform routine, manual, repetitive tasks, for a fixed duration in a high-intensity, time-critical environment appears to be a challenge likely to face the WA grains industry for the foreseeable future.

THE WORKING HOLIDAY VISA SCHEME

Eligible international travellers between the ages of 18 and 31 years ('backpackers') can apply for a Working Holiday visa (subclass 417) enabling them to work and holiday in Australia for up to 12 months. If they complete three months or 88 days work in a primary production or mining role in specified regional areas during this period they are eligible to apply for the Second Working Holiday visa (subclass 417). This visa entitles them to stay and work for up to another 12 months in Australia. This provides a significant incentive for international backpackers to secure farm-based work.

Each financial year about 41,000 applicants have their Second Working Holiday visa approved as a result of completing their on-farm work

requirements within immigration guidelines. The number seeking and securing farm work is higher but an accurate figure is harder to confirm.

A lot of these newly motivated working holiday travellers keenly seek work in the agricultural industry, following their dream to stay in Australia for two years rather than one. While there will always be a portion of Second Working Holiday (sub class 417) visa holders who return to farm work for more than one season, rarely do they return to the same farm due to the transient nature of their backpacking lifestyle.

Working holiday visa workers generally have a great attitude, motivation and work ethic. A large proportion of backpackers have completed further studies and held senior positions in their professional fields, bringing useful knowledge and skills.

However, the transition from holidaying backpacker to productive farm worker is not without its issues, the biggest challenge being these young people generally are from urban areas and have limited or no agricultural expertise. This limitation is often magnified by significant language barriers and cultural differences that amplify the skills shortfall.

This combination can increase the potential for personal injury and damage to high-value machinery as seasonal work demands long hours under high levels of stress. The impact of these incidents on productivity and profit can be considerable.

MAKING THE WORKING HOLIDAY VISA PROGRAM WORK FOR YOUR FARM

Understanding the limitations of the system and developing a plan to optimise the Working Holiday Visa (WHV) program are the first two vital steps in making this system work for your farm business.

The core of the plan should be based around developing an easily repeatable system of induction, initial training and monitoring; these farm policies and procedures should be easy to update and replicate season after season.

As employers, we need to learn to adapt and accept the huge cultural and social divide these young people are crossing. By being flexible we can assist them in this transition as they come to terms with the very foreign and sometimes overwhelming new workplace they find themselves in.

TABLE 1 Working holiday visa employer checklist

Communication	Can you manage a language barrier? Are you clear and concise with words?
Teamwork	Will they be working alone or in a team? Can they handle solitude on a farm?
Problem solving	Mechanical ability, what is your expectation or need?
Initiative	How much of their day will be controlled routine or supervised?
Planning	How much of their day's work will they be required to plan themselves?
Learning	What work skills do they bring with them? Or will they need longer to develop?
Self-management	How much independence will they be given?
Technology	How much farm technology will they need to understand? How much can be taught on the job?

Recognising our own strengths and weaknesses as employers is a key focus along with ensuring we have effective cross-cultural communication skills. This is often simply being prepared to explain something over and over until the message gets across.

The time pressures of seasonal work contrive to make a repetitive approach to communication challenging. Bringing the WHV holders onto the farm early to allow more induction time typically results in a safer employee, and less potential for damage to expensive equipment.

IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Knowing your business, the culture of your permanent staff and the critical skills you need from a seasonal employee will make it easier to identify the right people. Carefully selecting and employing the right people as opposed to simply hiring the most available people can save you money and prevent damage to equipment in the long run.

Some ways to improve the selection success rate and employment process include the following.

- Write a list of the characteristics you need or prefer to see in your seasonal employee.
- Know your limitations and boundaries for managing language, gender and culture, including the hard lessons learned through trial and error.
- Start early and be prepared to commence the employment term before the season starts to secure the right person.
- Hire for culture fit by looking for personality traits that may not fit into your team. For example; smokers, too outspoken, too shy and reserved.
- Negotiate on wages and packages. Start at the base rate

and offer incentives and rewards for improvements. Starting high simply to get people on farm can be costly in the long run and when the expectations are not met can produce a negative outcome for everyone involved.

- Discuss and negotiate the complete package before arrival. Be direct and decisive about the performance and reward matrix so there is no room for discontent or confusion.
- Prepare yourself to manage any challenges that you know from experience can occur during a short term contract, avoiding management of performance issues or allowing a situation to fester just to keep the short-term worker on farm can end badly.

GETTING ENGAGEMENT RIGHT

Traditionally seasonal work with backpackers has often relied on a verbal agreement for a casual employment arrangement. This approach may work well when both sides speak English, but the risk of misunderstanding and miscommunication grows with the size of the language barrier. Putting casual agreements into writing is one way of ensuring your rights as an employer are protected. A simple, straight forward, written generic agreement can be tailored quickly to each individual employee. Make sure each party gets a copy of the final agreement.

It is important to remember that international employees, no matter how much work experience they bring, will be new to your methods and routines. During the initial weeks, it is good practice when giving instructions to ask them to repeat the instruction back to you. This may seem time consuming but it can save time and grief from unintentional misunderstandings. This method also brings to light very

Sample checklist

	CHECK	NOTES
Farm maps up to date		
Local road maps up to date		
Emergency instructions for evacuation		
In case of a fire		
In case of medical emergency (accident)		
In case of a power fail		
Emergency service contacts up to date		
Working at heights policy discussed		
Working in confined spaces, eg silos		
Liquid loads – diesel tanks & fire units on utes		
Chemicals and procedures in emergency		
Remote location check in procedures		
Water supply		
Power supply		
On-farm fuel		
Phone services		
Known hazards identified		
Procedure to inform management / other workers if a hazard is identified		
Contact lists		
Workshop items and areas signposted / labelled		
Compass directions and farm orientation		
Daily work kit – packed lunch, etc.		
Meals and times		
Start and end season approximately		
Time sheet policy – clock on/off		
Smoking policy		
Mobile phone policy		
Alcohol policy		
Dress code		
Chain of command / responsibility		
Employee paperwork, TFN, super, ID, passport, emergency contacts		



PHOTO: NADINNE WILKINSON, GRDC

To sustain positive working relationships it is important to value the differences in how farming individuals communicate and work.

quickly any communication challenges a new employee might have.

INDUCTIONS

Getting new staff started should be seen as a continual process, rather than a job completed with a single day of induction.

Induction is also the right time to make sure all paperwork is completed and exchanged, including emergency contact details, wage and superannuation details, medical details (including checking the coverage and limitations of their travel insurance), checking their visa is valid and the right class and photocopying their passport.

The first day should be allocated

to explaining the most important things, such as where the hazards are on your farm and your expectation of the new staff member.

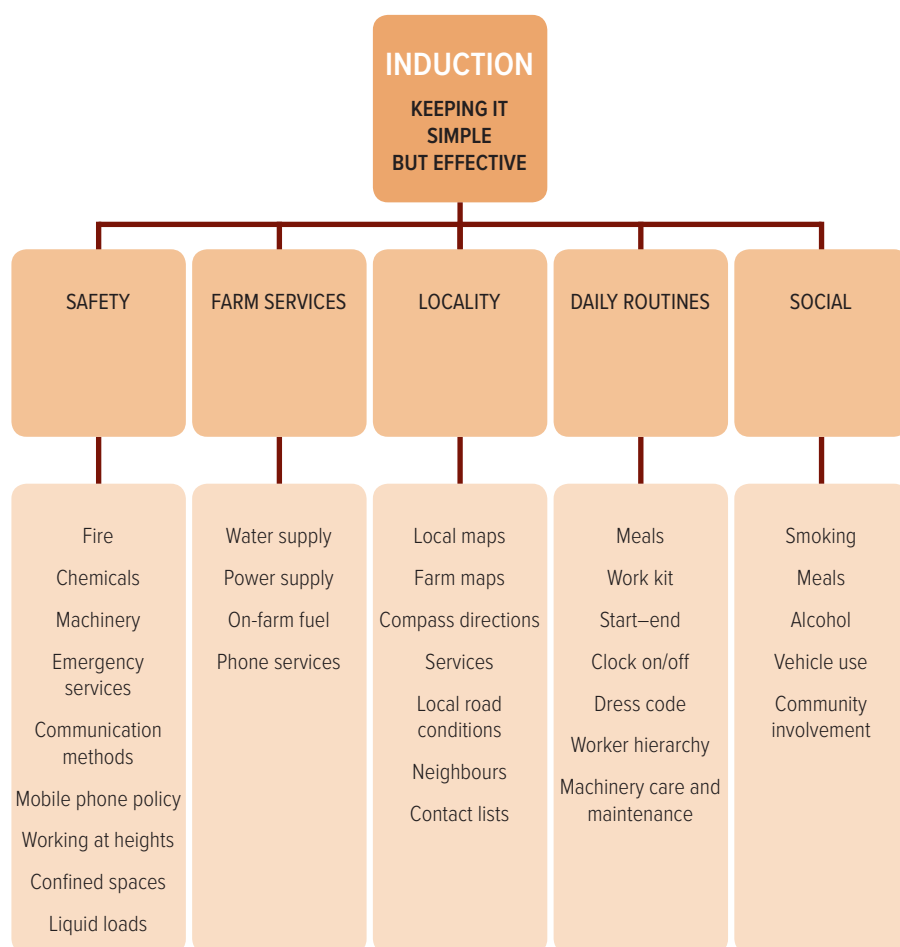
On the next page is a flow chart that sets out some important areas to cover on day one. For example, explain what water is in use and how the water supply on the farm works: electric pumps or gravitational. Also, explain the electricity system and process in the case of power outages. On many farms a power outage affects phone services and water supply, leaving a foreign employee in a dangerous and stressful situation if they are unaware of how to manage or correct

these issues in the summer months.

Using a consistent induction format means you can have confidence that all staff have been given the same initial information. A simple checklist (example above) can be used to make sure all the major areas are covered and is useful as a pre-season staff refresher and update.

SUMMARY

The aim should be to successfully employ short-term seasonal staff year in year out while keeping everyone's stress low and productivity high. Developing an easily repeatable, simple orientation/ induction process that continues beyond day one to ensure the new worker fully



understands all instructions is a vital tool.

Keeping communication simple and repetitive is important to deal with language barriers, and even experienced foreign travellers can have trouble initially understanding our Australian accents, dialect and expressions.

Communication is key to ensuring everyone stays happy and working towards the same goal.

Useful resources

A Guide to Farm Labour – GRDC

www.grdc.com.au/Resources/Publications/2015/12/A-guide-to-farm-labour

Department of Immigration and Border Protection

www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/417-

Food Fibre and Timber Industries Training Council (WA) Inc. Employer Resource & Student Handbook

www.fftitrainingcouncil.com.au

Dairy Australia

www.dairyaustralia.com.au

Farm Safe Alliance WA

www.farmsafewa.org

2 Workin Oz Pty Ltd – farm skills training and recruitment resources

www.2workinoz.com.au

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are foreign workers awards different to local staff?

Foreign workers with a Working Holiday visa (subclass 417) have the same legal employment rights and should be treated exactly the same as a resident worker. They are entitled to the same pay and superannuation according to state and federal awards. Tax rules are under review and employers should consult an accountant on current rules.

What happens if there is a workplace accident?

Foreign workers working legally in Australia are entitled to the same benefits as a resident and all workplace accidents are covered by the employer's workers compensation insurance. Most travellers have travel insurance for accidents outside of work hours. Some are able to obtain a Medicare card due to agreements between our governments. Employers operating as sole traders or partnerships in WA should refer to WAGELINE for awards and conditions. Employers operating as company should refer to the Federal Pastoral Award for pay and conditions.

Project code

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