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3 August 2020

Wimmera Development Association National Agricultural Workforce Submission
on behalf of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region

The Wimmera Development Association (WDA) is the region's peak economic development organisation servicing the Wimmera Southern Mallee and includes the member councils of West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, Northern Grampians, and Horsham. The Association's role is to work with business, the community and government(s) to attract new investment, further develop existing business and promote the Wimmera's sustainable development and employment opportunities, both within and outside the region.

This submission has collated input from several stakeholders across the Wimmera Southern Mallee region, including Federation University (Wimmera Campus), Longerenong College, Wimmera Southern Mallee LLEN, Skillinvest, Regional Development Victoria – Grampians and the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership.

Governance and Strategy

The WDA also provides additional governance and develops strategy around regional communities articulating what problem they are trying to solve. The WDA identifies and supports opportunities to collaborate and share resources to bring people to the region and explores further opportunities for co-op based employment. For this to work, excellent governance around the structures and clear strategy around purpose and focus is required. This is a real cultural challenge in the Agricultural sector.

The role of The Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals could be very important in developing appropriate business structures that could work in Agricultural/rural workplaces and communities.

There is a future role for Federal Government to support further work in this space.

Focus on Career Development.

Often EMPLOYERS recruit people at the start of a career in agricultural and rural settings, however there are often not the skills and knowledge required around on-boarding and induction giving many people poor first experience. If that is done well then career development needs to be a large investment as recruiting experienced people to rural/agricultural locations is difficult. Career development, internally, is generally more expensive in rural locations, often have access to less opportunity, and over time can have a detrimental impact on workforce culture and the adoption of new methods and workflows particularly around safety and technology. Where the only new people into the workforce are generally junior staff, this creates a very conservative culture. This is because the workplace becomes one where the senior people who have only worked at the one organisation say this is the way things are always done and new people are not rewarded for challenging existing thinking.

It is important to overcome this by supporting and encouraging staff in Agriculture/rural setting to do job placements in city and other regional locations. Also rewarding organisations that invest in training which encourages people to mix with workers from other organisations should be encouraged and supported to break down insularity.

Supporting partnerships in agricultural education.

The Wimmera Southern Mallee region has a long history of working collaboratively and leveraging many existing opportunities utilising regional networks. To unlock potential opportunities this requires further work with additional partnerships between schools and the Department of Education and Training, Longerenong College, Federation University as well as other tertiary operators to deliver agricultural programs as part of their curriculum.

The Regional Partnerships program, AgTIDE (Agricultural Training, Innovation and Development) is a digital Innovation project and a fantastic local example of regional collaboration involving State Government, Wimmera Development Association, Skillinvest, Longerenong College, Birchip Cropping Group, Federation and Melbourne Universities and GMMWater.

These project partnerships are driven by the project funding. Unfortunately, once projects are complete, many of these partnerships dissolve. So programs that encourage and maintain partnerships between education providers, the agricultural industry and other key stakeholders are vital.

There is a need to ensure that education providers have the means to include the latest technology in their courses (e.g. AgTIDE DATA Farm) as well as highlight to prospective students/workers the degree to which technology is part of farming to increase its appeal.

Pathways

State-wide LLENS (Local Learning and Employment Networks) have highlighted connections between the Agricultural and education sector as a priority to create a greater awareness that Agriculture includes so much more than just farming. Many of the trades available to school leavers are also in industries that support the Ag Sector, for example, mechanical, auto electrical, electro technology, plumbing, engineering, journalism, science and many other support businesses.

Agriculture pathways open the door to many opportunities in a person's career including opportunities to travel and undertake further studies overseas through a wide range of scholarships and personal development programs. Shining examples of the agricultural workforce are highly sought after by larger businesses to build on their internal capabilities and capacity to service their clients. A more extensive promotion of the opportunities in agriculture is required.

From a perspective of introducing undergraduate and post graduates to regional and rural settings. Federation and other Victorian and regional Universities have long connections with student placements in IT, engineering, health services, accounting and business services, education and a range of sustainability services which gives both the student and the employer opportunity to develop a relationship with their future regional workforce.

Longerenong College is a major asset to the Australian agricultural sector with a number of agtech projects currently being undertaken to further promote and move toward agtech farming. Local assets include the proposed Victorian Grains Innovation Hub, Longerenong College, Grains Innovation Park, and Federation

University as well as the many long standing grains, soils and water and social research collaborations existing across this region.

There is a real need to provide opportunities for centres/hubs to be created/developed where production and value-adding (e.g. grain production and food processing) are in close proximity, resulting in necessity to have access to skills/training in both.

Regional HR Network

Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional HR network is a locally supported initiative that with further support could assist with many retention and attraction problems in the agricultural sector with, in particular, understanding why people come and go, and working with partners to find local employment. The Wimmera Southern Mallee regional HR network is currently undertaking planning for entry/exit interviews for regional employers to gauge the attraction of or issues with workforce moving to regional areas.

Apprentices and trainees

Apprentices and trainees in the regions agricultural sector are an important component to workforce development and upskilling. Having access to organisations such as Skillinvest, Federation University and Longerenong College locally is important to support and grow the region's workforce. Many of the agricultural sectors' supply chains rely on numerous trades for consistent service delivery. Having these services available locally also allows for locals to be trained locally meaning reduced downtime for travel, and reduced costs for living and training away from home for both the employer and the student/worker.

Agricultural Traineeships (a Certificate III in Agriculture is classified as a Traineeship not an Apprenticeship) are an excellent feeder into sustaining employment within the agriculture industry. Trainees can enjoy on the job training while being employed within the industry as well as classroom based training to provide the perfect mix of learning. The ongoing employment opportunities within the industry once the traineeship is completed are significant.

Longerenong College usually enrolls around 25 students each year completing their Certificate III in Agriculture as part of an agricultural traineeship. In 2016, after three consecutive poor agricultural seasons across much of Victoria, the number of enrollments dropped to three.

Longerenong College, in conjunction with Skillinvest and the Victorian State Government introduced a program to subsidise the employment of 20 trainees across North West Victoria. The program was called the *New Agricultural Traineeships for School Leavers in Drought Affected North West Victoria*.

This program not only provided support to the industry through a very tough period but ensured trainees continued to be trained in the industry.

The success of the program during such a challenging time for the industry confirmed wage subsidies for trainees in agriculture works and this should be a consideration for Governments attempting to attract young people into the industry. The Wimmera and Southern Mallee region is a perfect location to apply the subsidies as there are so many potential employers available and Longerenong College as a peak agricultural training facility is located in the heart of the area.

Housing

Housing in rural and agricultural communities is often substandard and a real barrier to recruitment. As housing in rural towns and on-farm often has no opportunity for capital growth it discourages investment by private

investors in renovations and/or building new housing. This lack of quality housing stock leads to low-quality housing which has little insulation and is expensive to heat and cool and is often the only housing available to the lowest-paid parts of the workforce. The rental market is often expensive relative to other parts of Australia and therefore a person working in rural locations generally has high rents relative to the quality of the house, combined with very large heating and cooling costs which counters many of the benefits of the rural living experience. Access to water for things like garden and lawns can often be an issue decreasing the liveability factor even more.

Whilst capital returns cannot be easily changed, incentivising people to renovate rural housing to increase liveability by lowering heating and cooling costs and having increased amenity will greatly improve the ability to recruit. Targeting urban areas in rural shires that have low or negative capital growth for renovation by offering tax incentives for property owners and or investors could be one way to progress this or encouraging innovative models to encourage investments in a whole of town format rather than ad-hoc at each house level in a community.

To tackle the issue in housing as explained above, there is an immediate need for support from the Federal Government to increase investment in housing in rural Australia to improve the attraction and retention of not only the agricultural workforce, but the viability of rural areas.

Infrastructure

Ensuring towns have comparable access to telecommunications infrastructure to regional city locations is important. The Government has two schemes in place, Blackspot Mobile Towers and the newly implemented NBN tax. Both will assist rural and agricultural locations to hopefully not fall further back in telecommunications/Internet access infrastructure. Ensuring that there is adequate public transport to allow workforce, teenagers and children to access major centres and capitals is also a key part in retaining the workforce. If private transport is the only viable way to access a community it is a real penalty. That means public transport services need to be designed to leave and arrive at reasonable times and be reasonably priced. It also cannot have 'milk run' routes dragging out travel times. The liveability for the family is an important consideration for potential employees in agriculture in rural communities and unless these are tackled then recruiting and retaining people remains a challenge.

Renewable energy

Many parts of rural Australia have a competitive advantage when it comes to generating renewable energy through solar and wind, however, this investment in rural communities is often curtailed due to historical decisions meaning that rural communities are at the end of the line and it is often hard to put energy back in the grid. Whilst on the surface this seems little to do with agricultural employment it is a huge opportunity cost. That is because these stranded renewable energy assets are preventing further investment in these communities in diversification opportunities. These cannot be realised particularly in areas such as food manufacturing and sometimes mining due to the rural location not having access to the cheaper power that other locations have benefitted from, due to prior government investment in significant power grid infrastructure. If the rural location had ability to deliver energy back into the grid it would allow regions to be able to have significantly lower power costs for manufacturing. Cheaper energy combined with often lower land costs will allow industrial opportunities to be explored and realised particularly around food manufacturing. From this would flow diversification in career

opportunities and further investment from the private sector in other infrastructure increasing liveability of the region.

Skilled Migration and Visa access for rural locations

Encouraging and prioritising migration targeting skill gaps in a rural location can have huge benefits. Often it is in conjunction with 'Hero Employers' who may focus on one particular migrant community creating a more supportive environment. This supportive environment increases retention. Rural communities still need to have the infrastructure, housing, public transport and services to ensure migrants are supported. Rewarding visa holders who commit to longer periods in regional communities and supporting rural employers who employ visa holders is important. For this to work, rural communities need boutique designed migrant and visa support. Visa/Migrant/Settlement service support needs to be far more multi-skilled and supported by a network across organisations as the volume is less than the city environment but the range of issues is no less. This support is crucial for the ability of the agricultural industry to successfully recruit and retain migrants and visa holders in rural locations.

Post COVID, the Federal Government needs to work with rural Australia to design a fit for purpose visa/migration scheme designed for rural Australia.

Regional Health & Education Services

Rural health services are important to both physical and mental health and to support rural/regional liveability. Indicators suggest that rural living has less access to adequate health services and lower outcomes. Ensuring that health services are supported in regional/rural areas further supports the agricultural sector's workforce and this should include an extension to the telehealth service. With the current nature of agriculture and the need for people to work remotely we need to highlight the importance of mental health support. Furthermore having high quality primary and secondary education facilities is another key way to provide, attract and retain a suitable workforce.

Digital Connectivity

From a liveability point of view digital connectivity is critical in attracting and retaining a regional agricultural workforce. Many of the regions' workers live in rural areas and are physically disconnected to the larger regional centres. As such, lack of connectivity, poor and unreliable digital services have an impact of both workforce productivity, personal development (online education) and personal connectedness to family and friends. People living and working in agricultural regions are entitled to at least a minimum level of connectivity which can provide these benefits.

As has been seen through the COVID-19 period, additional strain has been added to the already under resourced regional and rural infrastructure creating further hardship and frustrations to many living and working in regional/rural areas.

Digital coverage will also support improved OH&S practices to support health and wellbeing and to address the high rate of rural workplace incidents.

Reliance on transient workforce

The Wimmera Southern Mallee agricultural sector has a great reliance on the transient workforce including backpackers and contractors especially throughout the harvest season in horticulture, grains and livestock. A reduction in this segment of the workforce will see dramatic impacts to the industry as will be seen during the 2020 season due to the restrictions of people movement due to COVID-19. It is envisaged that the lack of suitable workers will place many of the regions' agricultural operators under immense pressure in both off farm activities as well as the supporting businesses that move across the eastern seaboard to undertake duties such as shearing, contract windrowing and harvesting, agronomy and more.

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Addressing perception

Regional liveability is a key criteria for the regions' workforce to be able to attract and retain workforce. Digital connectivity, public transport, housing availability, educational opportunities and vibrant communities increase the possibility of people relocating to agricultural regions. Attracting workforce from larger regional centres or metropolitan areas becomes increasingly difficult when competing where services are plentiful, modern housing is well supported and technological supports are all firmly in place. Regional areas need to be given the tools and ability to market to a potential workforce on an even level playing field for rural and regional areas to support the agricultural sector.

The armed forces have undertaken excellent promotion about the lifestyle over a number of years, is there a role for government to promote and highlight the opportunities for living in rural Australia?

There's a need to try and address current perceptions especially when the traditional supply of workforce (regional and rural areas) is declining in population. Apart from overseas migration this will involve trying to attract workers from urban areas which, as the discussion paper outlines, faces competition from construction and services industries. Why go into this industry when the only times you hear about it involves the impact of natural disasters and they're only going to get worse? So there needs to be a push from peak bodies to emphasise the positives around the industry adapting and changing in these areas about technology and animal welfare to be sustainable going forward rather than only being noted for pushing for assistance during challenging times.

Public Transport Connectivity

The Wimmera Southern Mallee region has a number of areas within the agricultural sector with a transient population. Connectivity through public transport cannot be underestimated. The region is home to Longerenong College (residential) and Federation University (regional trades, health, education and community services and research) and along with employers such as LuvADuck and Australian Wildflowers. All of these organisations have a reliance on workers of a transient nature. Public transport connectivity in the region would allow for easier dispersal of both students and workers across the region as well as to and from the major cities as well as reduce perceptions of isolation with easier access by and to family and friends.

Wimmera Development Association and our regional partners look forward to seeing the outcome of this process and the opportunity to be involved in any future consultation work towards this review.

Sincerely



Chris Sounness
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Wimmera Development Association

In collaboration with

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Longerenong College
Wimmera Southern Mallee LLEN
Skillinvest
Regional Development Victoria – Grampians Region
Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships
Regional Development Australian – Grampians Region