

Skills issues in the horticulture industry of the Riverina



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Skills issues in the Riverina's horticulture industry

Regional Development Australia Riverina (RDA Riverina) is part of a national network of committees fostering regional economic development.

RDA committees work with all three tiers of government, regional business and the wider community to boost the economic capability and performance of their region. Focused on the economic, social and environmental issues affecting its communities, RDA Riverina has a pivotal role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Riverina.

In early 2017, through RDA Riverina's relationships with the local horticulture industry, we became aware of a skills shortage. Growers expressed difficulty in finding skilled staff after advertising widely. Affected horticulture industries in the Riverina include irrigated crops of citrus, tree nuts, vegetables, stone fruit, wine grapes and the cooler climate apple industry.

With the Riverina region producing:

- One third NSW fruit and nuts - \$271 million
- One third NSW vegetables - \$141 million
- Half NSW wine grape production - \$81 million

this skills issue has had an enormous impact and will continue to impact on economic development in the Riverina and as well as NSW if solutions are not found. RDA Riverina's Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (Subclass 187 visa) (RSMS) enables regional employers to sponsor overseas skilled workers and employ them in skilled positions that cannot be filled using the local labour market. We found that the horticulture industry was using RSMS at a higher rate than before.

RDA Riverina sought funding from the NSW Government to conduct a study to establish and validate the extent of the issue and formulate policy responses to address these skills shortages. This formed part of a broader study across NSW of skills needs. In June 2017, RDA Riverina engaged RMCG to lead this investigation.

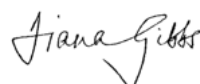
With new initiatives in the Riverina supporting agriculture, including TAFE NSW Griffith Campus hosting the Agribusiness Skills Point and the new AgriSciences Research and Business Park at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, this study supports the growing recognition of the importance of the horticulture sector in our community.

Including a desktop review, stakeholder consultation and industry surveys, this research informs government, industry and community about skills in the horticulture industry and makes five recommendations.

RDA Riverina look forward to working with others to bring these recommendations to reality for the economic benefit of our region



Diana Gibbs
Chair, RDA Riverina



Executive Summary

Challenges exist with the attraction, retention and development of a skilled workforce in the production horticulture industries of the Riverina region in New South Wales.

THE STUDY

Anecdotal evidence has suggested there is a skills issue in the Riverina horticulture industries in New South Wales. In response to expressed concerns, RDA Riverina sought to establish and validate the extent of the issue and formulate a policy response to address it.

RM Consulting Group (RMCG) was engaged by RDA Riverina to establish and validate the extent to which there may be a skills issue in the Riverina horticulture industry, and provide clear policy recommendations on strategies to address the identified problems.

The study was undertaken through a desktop review, industry survey and a series of stakeholder consultation workshops across the region, structured around a systemic approach to workforce development. The systemic approach considers the various elements across the entire workforce system and their interaction and relationship in determining workforce outcomes. This focused the study beyond human resource management practices and the training system, to also include the broader labour market conditions and influencing policy environment factors, such as regional conditions and infrastructure.

FINDINGS

The study confirmed there is a skills issue in the horticulture industry of the Riverina region. The extent of the issue has not been properly defined, as many in the industry struggle to entertain the idea of recruiting higher skilled workers when challenged to meet existing general farm labour needs. In part, this challenge is attributed to a failure of reflective and critical self-appraisal by the industry as to why it is not considered an employer of choice.

Substantive opportunities exist for improved coordinated effort across horticultural industries and other relevant stakeholders to assume ownership and address the skills issue. Relevant stakeholders need to include existing training providers located in the region, including the Riverina Institute of TAFE and Charles Sturt University. While these institutions are considered amongst the best training providers of production horticulture qualifications in Australia, they have failed to deliver a skilled horticulture workforce in the region. Dwindling student enrolments in these courses is problematic and should be addressed through means such as targeted marketing and promotion of their existing training packages.

Of the workforce currently employed in horticulture, there is a lack of recognition of the value and opportunity to develop existing staff resources through internal recruitment and upskilling strategies. Gaps in available support services, including human resource management tools such as position descriptions and defined career pathways, inhibit existing staff development opportunities. Opportunities to improve training course

content and delivery methods, including on-farm, could also be explored to upskill existing staff, whilst improving the viability of training providers.

Horticultural businesses within the Riverina region demonstrated a preference to employ international workers, however, there is a demonstrated constraint in investing in the upskilling of visa workers due to risks in immigration policy changes. International workers are favoured over domestic labour based on perceptions of the work ethic, attitude and welfare dependency of Australian horticulture labour. Furthermore, housing availability was considered a priority issue in specific geographic areas of the region, such as Griffith, to be able to attract skilled workers in the first instance.

Attracting workers to the horticulture sector will continue to be challenging, however, due to the perceived negative image of the industry. This is a foundational challenge that must be addressed in order to have any success at addressing the issues of horticulture skill attraction and development in the Riverina.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Establish a collaborative working group of industry stakeholders to champion horticulture skill development in the Riverina.

A collaborative platform of industry and service providers is recommended to champion the development of skill needs to support the horticulture industry. Leadership for this group should be driven by industry, however a cross sector agent may be more appropriate in the interim development phase, e.g. RDA Riverina.

The recommended first task for the working group is to review the findings of this report to establish a clear vision, work plan and budget to progress the development of a skilled horticulture workforce in the Riverina.

Recommendation 2: Support the promotion of existing priority training programs offered in the Riverina, including through school career days.

A coordinated effort to promote existing tailored training programs on offer within the Riverina region, specific to horticulture skill development is also advised. The region is recognised as home to exceptional institutions in the delivery of horticulture skill training, however, these institutions fail to promote this as an asset. This recommendation encourages a collaborative approach between these institutions and a rigorous monitoring program of the promotion strategy to ensure evaluation of its effectiveness.

Recommendation 3: Develop industry relevant on-the-job training packages to support the skill development of existing staff resources.

Support for horticultural businesses to deliver formal and informal training programs in-house to support the skill development of existing employees is advised. Existing workforce capacities are presently under-utilised, and targeted support in the delivery of multi-disciplinary training packages in-house is recommended to encourage on-the-job upskilling and internal recruitment practices.

Recommendation 4: Develop a human resource management toolkit for horticulture employers, including clear career pathways.

The development of a regional human resource management toolkit for horticulture producers is encouraged to include capacity building and decision support tools such as a skills register, needs analysis tool, induction packs and position descriptions. The toolkit should also include clear career pathways which outline the career progression opportunities in horticulture careers in the Riverina region.

Recommendation 5: Develop and implement a regional promotion strategy, including the promotion of skilled horticulture jobs.

As the Riverina region has a number of attractive selling points to potential skilled workers, a coordinated approach with local government and industry groups is encouraged. The collaboration should aim to ensure representative key messaging on the availability of jobs, the quality of regional infrastructure and services, transport and proximity to major urban centres, to promote the region to potential skilled workers and their families.