

Seasonal worker

Australia's government has defended the country's seasonal worker programme despite its poor uptake. The former Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs Duncan Kerr told a conference in Sydney (Wednesday) the government remains committed to the scheme. Australia has agreed to include Papua New Guinea in the program which was launched in 2008 to grant up to 2500 temporary work visas over three years. But at its halfway point fewer than 60 visas have been granted. Duncan Kerr says that's likely to change in the near future.

Radio Australia's Presenter Bill Bainbridge speaks with Duncan Kerr, Tasmanian Senator and former Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs '

KERR: Well I think there is no doubt we have not had as strong a demand for seasonal workers as was expected because of the global economic recession and subsequent changes to the Australian labour market, so it had a slower start than expected. But because the scheme has been so robustly designed, where it has been drawn down and it's been a great success for those who have used the available labour for the people who participated and it is certainly been built in a way that is designed to make sure it cannot be criticised by those that say the workers will be taken advantage of or exploited or that it will drive down Australian wage standards and conditions.

BAINBRIDGE: So you mentioned there had not been as strong a take up. I think the aim was for about 2,500 workers, but from Vanuatu and Tonga only about 60 came. Are you able to draw any conclusions from that, isn't that just too small a number?

KERR: No, I don't think it's too small a number, because what it does show is where we have employers that engage with the scheme and utilise it, the program works well and certainly now we've just seen our Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, sign a memorandum of understanding with Papua New Guinea, so that they can be added to the arrangements and we're certainly looking forward to stronger economic conditions and I am sure that that it does not take me as an economic forecaster. Everyone is forecasting that the demand for horticultural products out of Australia will be growing.

BAINBRIDGE: So just on that most recent agreement signed with PNG. Are you able to put any further detail onto that in terms of numbers or timing?

KERR: Look, I am not sure of the precise detail of that agreement, but what it does do is add Papua New Guinea as one of the eligible countries in the scheme and their officials are participating, together with officials from Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tonga and New Zealand. New Zealand, of course, has had a seasonal labour scheme in place for quite a number of years and we're continuing to benefit from their experience and we're exchanging information. The key thing about this is that it is a pilot, it's put in place so that we can learn from its early implementation experiences. It certainly is subject to improvement, and that's why we are having a mid operation review. But everyone who has participated in the conference to date has been very, very positive. Those who are representing the horticultural industries, the employers and those that have looked to the scheme for an opportunity for remittances and employment from our Pacific neighbours at a time when Australian labour demand picks up and we are not able to supply it ourselves.

BAINBRIDGE: And just on that point of remittances. Do we have any data yet about how this has had an impact in terms of the level of remittances, how that might have assisted in places like Vanuatu and Tonga?

KERR: Well, I certainly a lot of conversational evidence. This will be accessed in a more

assistedly robust way, but those who are speaking at the conference have described how people who have been participating have been sending money home, re-roofing their homes, providing the school fees for their younger brothers and sisters to fulfil their education, all the chances. So there's a lot of what you might call conversational evidence. But I don't think anyone would think that this scheme does not have big economic benefits for those families and their countries that are able to participate

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