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PORT VILA, Vanuatu (PACNEWS)

Remittances from Vanuatu's seasonal work scheme with New Zealand has raked in an average income of VT2 billion per season. It's now into its fourth season - with an expected income of VT8 billion. According to the country's Commissioner of Labour, Lionel Kaluat, the Recognised Seasonal Employment (RSE) scheme has contributed immensely to the improvement of living standards for ni-Vanuatu. "RSE has enabled our workers to address their basic needs at home. It has provided skills for them, especially if they return for another season. We have also seen change in the character of workers that have come back from New Zealand, said Mr Kaluat. As a result of the work experience gained, Vanuatu will have a 'Work Ready' group of skilled workers to respond to any demands from New Zealand or the new work scheme with Australia, the Pacific Seasonal Workers Pilot Scheme (PSWPS). At the end of the third season, which ended in March this year, there were 2,600 ni- Vanuatu employed at various horticultural farms in New Zealand. "Vanuatu has earned remarkable income from the scheme with an average worker returning home with between NZD\$5-10,000, said New Zealand high commissioner in Port Vila, Jeff Langley. Mr Langley said 60-70 percent of the RSE participation income is going to the rural areas. The scheme has been successful for Vanuatu because it has taken the opportunity and 'grabbed it with both hands', said Mr Langley. Another reason for success, according to the New Zealand diplomat, is the 'flexible' nature of the work scheme between the Vanuatu Government and the employers in New Zealand. "There is no political interference and the agents make direct recruitment. There is also good communication between government agencies involved in the recruitment process. Vanuatu enacted a Seasonal Employment Act 23 in 2007 which provides a legal framework for seasonal employment policy. The framework provides for an Employment Service Unit to facilitate the process of workers recruitment. "We screen and re-screen applicants and involve the chiefs and church leaders in the process. This is to ensure that we get the best workers, said Kaluat. He said Vanuatu workers had experienced minor social problems in New Zealand, thus the need to be thorough in screening. "We have also found that workers need to undergo basic literacy trainings before joining the scheme. Financial literacy is a must for all workers, said Mr Kaluat. On the future of RSE, the New Zealand high commissioner is optimistic that demand from employers will continue and countries like Vanuatu will provide the much needed supply of workers to meet this demand. "I see the scheme as a long term income stream for Vanuatu. Future options for this kind of scheme could include care for the elderly, construction, meat and dairy industries, fishing and tourism services, said Langley. Both High Commissioner Langley and Mr Kaluat were panellists at a media workshop organised by the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) and the Media Association blong Vanuatu (MAV) in Port Vila, in the lead up to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting this week.

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