

Draft Core Skills Occupations List (CSOL) Consultation

Jobs and Skills Australia
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Via: CoreSkillsList@jobsandskills.gov.au

About Berries Australia

Berries Australia was established in November 2018 as a joint venture between the Australian Blueberry Growers' Association Inc. (ABGA), Raspberries and Blackberries Australia Inc. (RABA) and Strawberries Australia Inc. (SAI) to represent the interests of the Australian berry industry as a whole. Valued at \$1.04 billion/annum, the berry industry now represents the single largest fresh produce category in Australian supermarkets. Berries are grown in every state in Australia and due to this geographic spread are produced virtually year-round. A significant proportion of producers grow at least two berry types.

Submission

Background

Berries Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission as the industry, like many other agricultural industries, finds accessing skilled workers challenging. It is well recognised that berry growers have a high demand for low skilled workers due to the continued reliance on hand picking but it should also be noted that compared to some other parts of agriculture, berry growing is quite technical and much of that expertise is in short supply within Australia. It should also be noted that rubus and blueberries are relatively 'young' industries in Australia so local expertise is still being developed and benefits from the opportunity to learn from overseas skilled workers.

To establish an understanding of the skills required and used by berry growers, Berries Australia developed a short survey (Appendix A) which focused on those occupations commonly/historically used by the industry which were identified as under review by JSA. It should be noted that berry growers indicated that the CSOL survey sent out by JSA was too long and required too much personal information and therefore should not be considered as a definitive source of data. The Berries Australia targeted survey had a 30% response rate (83 responses) which is much higher than other surveys we have sent out highlighting that this is an important issue for our members.

Berries Australia and our members fully understand that the CSOL is designed to assist with true skills shortages and an occupation is considered to be in shortage when "employers are unable to fill

or have considerable difficulty filling, vacancies for an occupation or cannot meet significant specialised skill needs within that occupation, at current levels of remuneration and conditions of employment and in reasonably accessible locations (as defined by the Skills Priority List methodology¹). The regional location of many of our farms is often precisely why they are unable to find appropriate skilled workers, and this should be a factor to support the inclusion of relevant roles not their exclusion, which seems somewhat counter intuitive.

Results

As previously stated, the survey had a response rate significantly above the response rate for other surveys which shows a high level of interest in the issue. The respondents also ranged from smaller employers to very large employers highlighting that access to skilled workers is an issue regardless of business size and recruiting expertise. We make no claims that the survey is statistically valid, but it does show some clear trends and highlights that many of the occupations under review are still required and in shortage in regional Australia.

To reduce the time taken to fill in the survey we identified the following occupations on the 'under consultation' list as being relevant for berry production:

- Fruit Grower
- Production Nursery Grower
- Horticultural Crop Growers nec
- Quality Assurance Manager
- Agricultural Consultant
- Agronomist
- Agricultural and Agritech Technician
- Motor Mechanic (General)
- Small Engine Mechanic
- Arborist
- Irrigation Technician
- Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist

Twenty-four respondents (out of 80) indicated that they currently use visa holders in skilled roles with a total of 83 visa workers employed across all respondents.

Figure 1 below shows which of these occupations is in most demand within the berry industry

¹ [Skills Shortages Analysis | Jobs and Skills Australia](#)

Considering these occupations, have you tried to recruit for any of these roles during the past three years? (tick all that apply)

Answered: 65 Skipped: 18

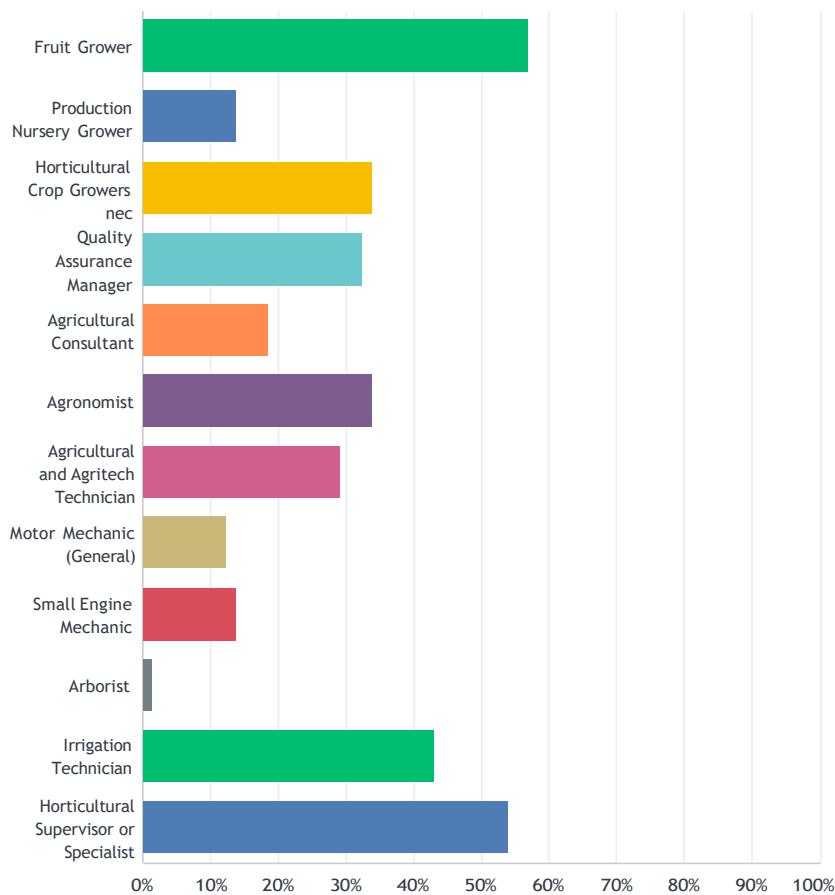


Figure 1 – Occupations recruited for in last three years

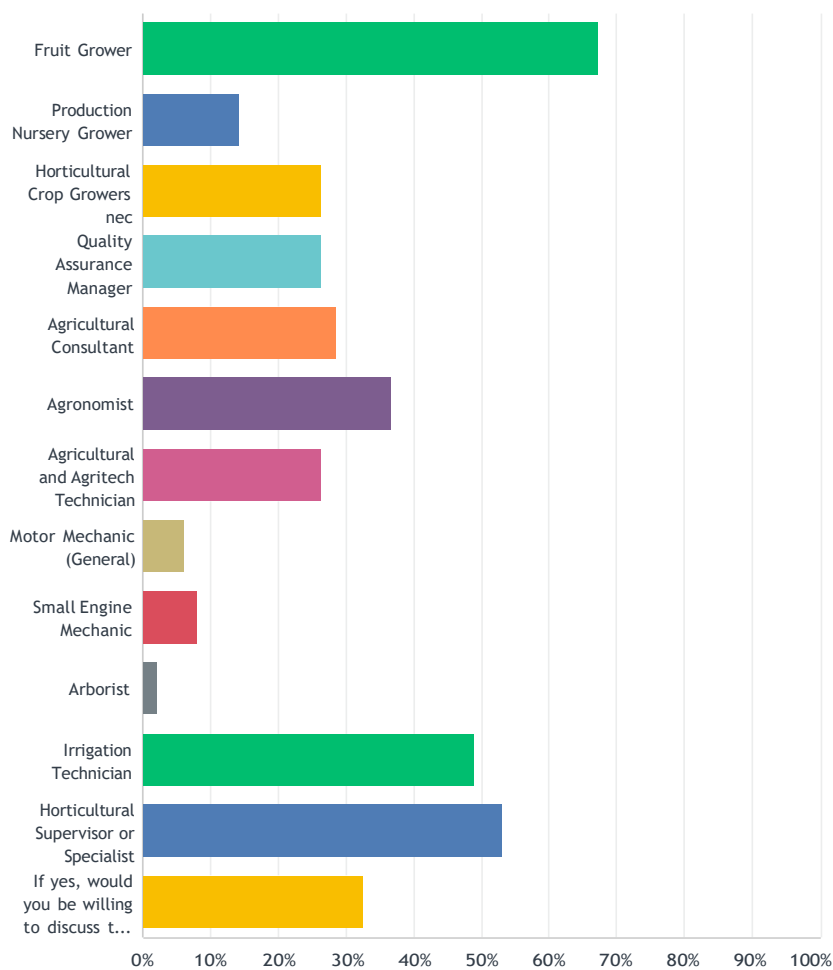
It can be seen from the data that more than 50% of respondents to this question (n=65) have recruited for the positions of ‘horticultural supervisor or specialist’ and for the occupation of ‘fruit grower’ indicating that these occupations are in very high demand in the berry industry. As mentioned above, fruit growing in berries is indeed a specialist skill set and requires a detailed level of understanding of fruit physiology and production along with high level planning skills. Berries are very high value but have a very high cost of production so there is a need for specialist skill sets to ensure profit margins are maintained.

Other in -demand occupations include irrigation technician (43%) agronomist (34%), horticultural crop growers NEC (34%) QA Manager (32%) and agricultural technician (29%).

Of those roles, 67% of respondents to this question (n=49) conducted labour market testing for the fruit grower role and 53% for the horticulture supervisor role as per figure 2 below.²

Have you done any labour market testing on any of these roles? (tick all that apply)

Answered: 49 Skipped: 34



To provide additional context, Berries Australia then followed up individual growers about their experience with labour market testing using the following set of questions.

1. What skilled visa positions have you done labour market testing on in the last 3 years?

² It should be noted that for the purposes of this survey labour market testing implies that the recruitment process has been done with the specific intent of demonstrating that the grower was unable to attract suitable local candidates.

2. How did you do the labour market testing? (what sort of advertising, for how long etc)
3. What level of response did you get to the labour market testing from local applicants?
4. Did you employ any of the local applicants?
5. If you did get a response from local applicants and did not employ them, why were they not suitable?

The follow up approach was conversational and qualitative, so the responses are summarised below to provide an insight into the issues faced with recruiting for these positions rather than a definitive data set.³

1. What skilled visa positions have you done labour market testing on in the last 3 years?

The responses largely aligned with the data from the survey, although the role of fruit inspector was cited which is not on any of the CSOL consultation lists. It should be noted that while occupations such as Agritech or agricultural technicians are not used by large numbers of growers they are highly sought after by larger enterprises and very difficult to find locally.

2. How did you do the labour market testing? (what sort of advertising, for how long etc)?

Advertising periods covered a minimum of 30 days and most growers used a range of platforms including SEEK and WorkForce Australia as well as social media.

3. What level of response did you get to the labour market testing from local applicants?

Growers in Queensland, Tasmania and NSW indicated that they did have local applicants however WA growers found it difficult to attract any local applicants which they attribute to their geographic location. The WA respondents indicated that it was almost impossible to fill any skilled roles and the current ANZSCO classifications are not helpful.

4. Did you employ any of the local applicants?

There were examples where local applicants were found but this was very much the exception.

5. If you did get a response from local applicants and did not employ them, why were they not suitable?

Overwhelmingly the respondents indicated that the local applicants were unskilled and did not have the appropriate experience. It was noted that in regions with small populations and low unemployment it was unsurprising that there were no suitable local candidates.

Conclusions

³ Berries Australia is happy to discuss this information further but is conscious of maintaining grower confidentiality.

It is well documented that agriculture in Australia is experiencing an acute skills shortage. The severity of skills shortages within the industry has been recognised in numerous industry communications⁴, government surveys and statistics⁵, government inquiries⁶, and is well documented in recent academic literature⁷⁸⁹¹⁰¹¹.

In this environment, growers recruiting for skilled occupations struggle to find any suitably qualified applicants. These shortages are now widespread, across all production specialist and also business leadership roles. The survey data supports this contention and there is an ongoing need for a number of the roles currently on the under-consultation list, particularly fruit grower, horticulture, irrigation technician, agronomist, horticultural crop growers NEC, QA Manager and agricultural technician. Growers have recently undertaken labour market testing for all of these occupations and have largely been unable to fill using local candidates.

We contend that these roles in particular meet the JSA criteria that an occupation is considered to be in shortage when “employers are unable to fill or have considerable difficulty filling, vacancies for an occupation or cannot meet significant specialised skill needs within that occupation, at current levels of remuneration and conditions of employment and in reasonably accessible locations (as defined by the Skills Priority List methodology¹²).

Berries Australia would welcome continued engagement with the JSA on this issue as we are aware that our survey is more of a snapshot than a deep analysis of the issue. That said, we were only prompted to do our own survey after growers complained that the JSA was too detailed, time consuming and intrusive. Our own assessment of the JSA survey supports this view and therefore the data gathered by this survey should be supplemented with other data sources. We would be extremely disappointed if agriculturally relevant occupations were struck off the list based on the results of the JSA survey alone, as different sectors of the economy have different levels of capability in relation to survey responses.

⁴ <https://agrifutures.com.au/news/overcoming-the-agriculture-sector-skills-shortage/>

⁵ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-workforce/labour-use/2022#summary>

⁶ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-agricultural-workforce-strategy.pdf>

⁷ [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maja-](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maja-Zaloznik/publication/239923723)

[Zaloznik/publication/239923723](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maja-Zaloznik/publication/239923723) Staff shortages and immigration in agriculture/links/54733f2b0cf2d67fc0360c73/Staff-shortages-and-immigration-in-agriculture.pdf

⁸ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0743016721001236>

⁹ https://acda.edu.au/resources/FPJ_Winter_2022_Pratley.et.al-DRAFT.pdf

¹⁰ <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-01/apo-nid233856.pdf>

¹¹ [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wen-Wu-](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wen-Wu-24/publication/355770042)

[24/publication/355770042](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wen-Wu-24/publication/355770042) THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA'S AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE Report prepared by Australia's Innovation Catalyst CITATION COPYRIGHT AND DISCLAIMER/links/617cb3173c987366c3037855/THE-FUTURE-OF-AUSTRALIAS-AGRICULTURAL-WORKFORCE-Report-prepared-by-Australias-Innovation-Catalyst-CITATION-COPYRIGHT-AND-DISCLAIMER.pdf

¹² [Skills Shortages Analysis | Jobs and Skills Australia](#)

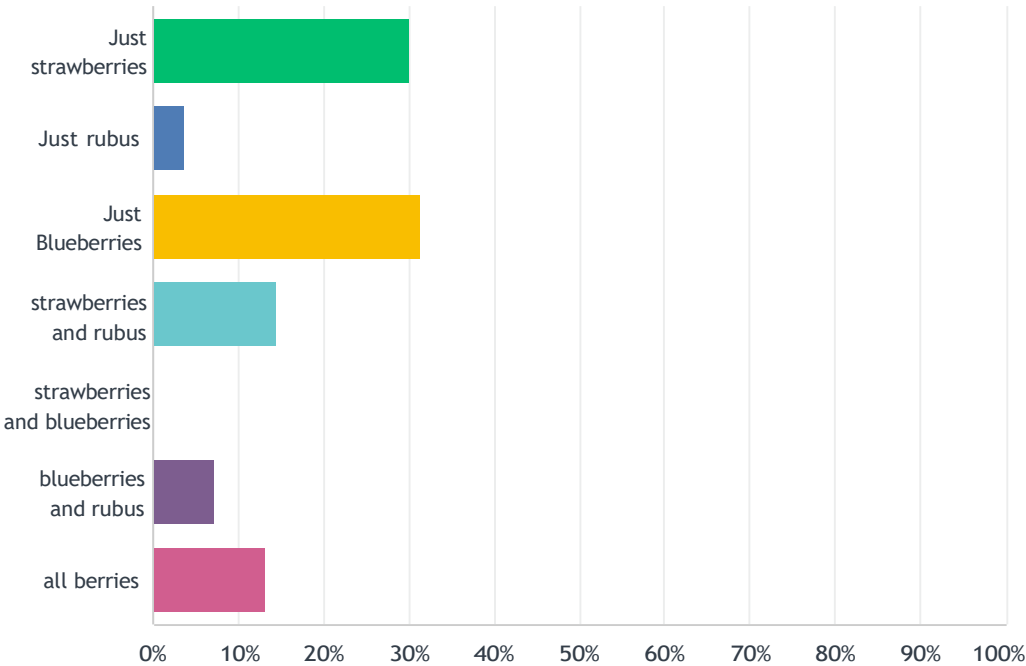


 to discuss these results in more detail.



Q1 What berry do you grow?

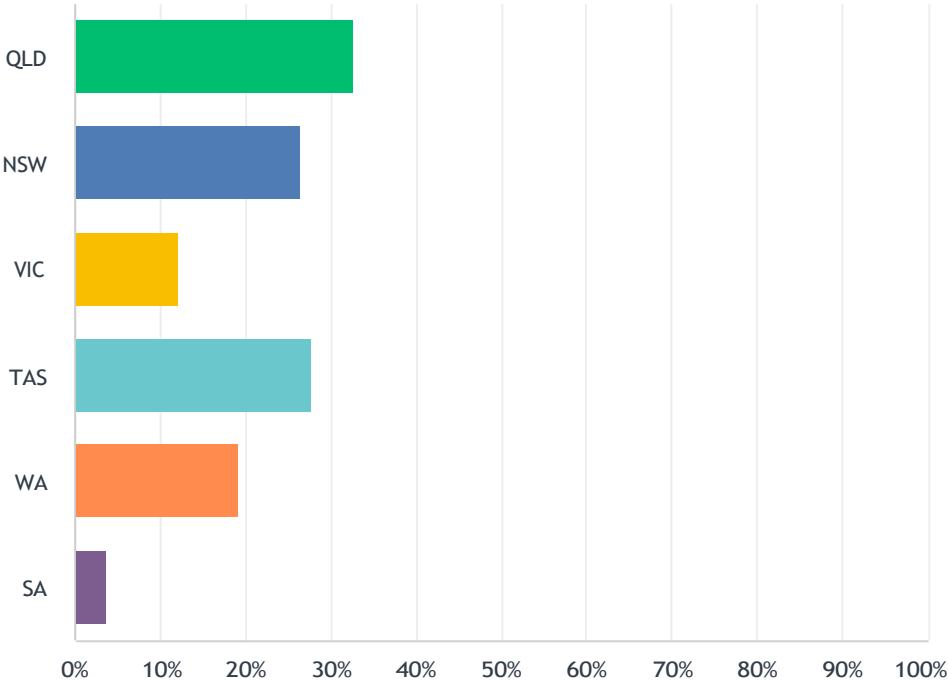
Answered: 83 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Just strawberries	30.12%	25
Just rubus	3.61%	3
Just Blueberries	31.33%	26
strawberries and rubus	14.46%	12
strawberries and blueberries	0.00%	0
blueberries and rubus	7.23%	6
all berries	13.25%	11
TOTAL		83

Q2 Which state are you located (tick all that apply)

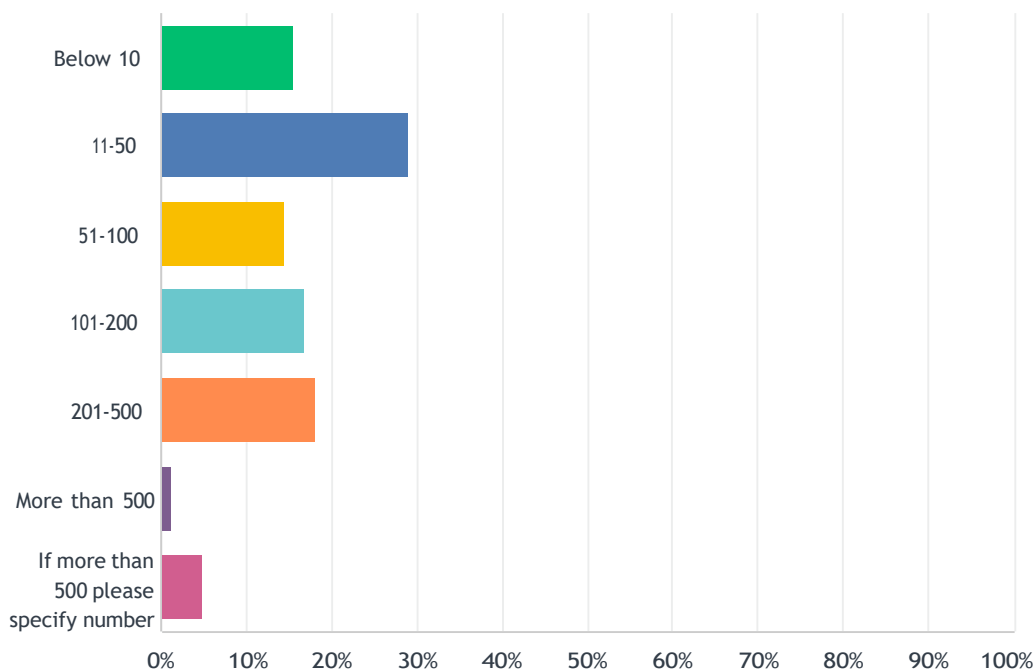
Answered: 83 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
QLD	32.53%	27
NSW	26.51%	22
VIC	12.05%	10
TAS	27.71%	23
WA	19.28%	16
SA	3.61%	3
Total Respondents: 83		

Q3 Roughly how many casuals do you employ on a seasonal basis?

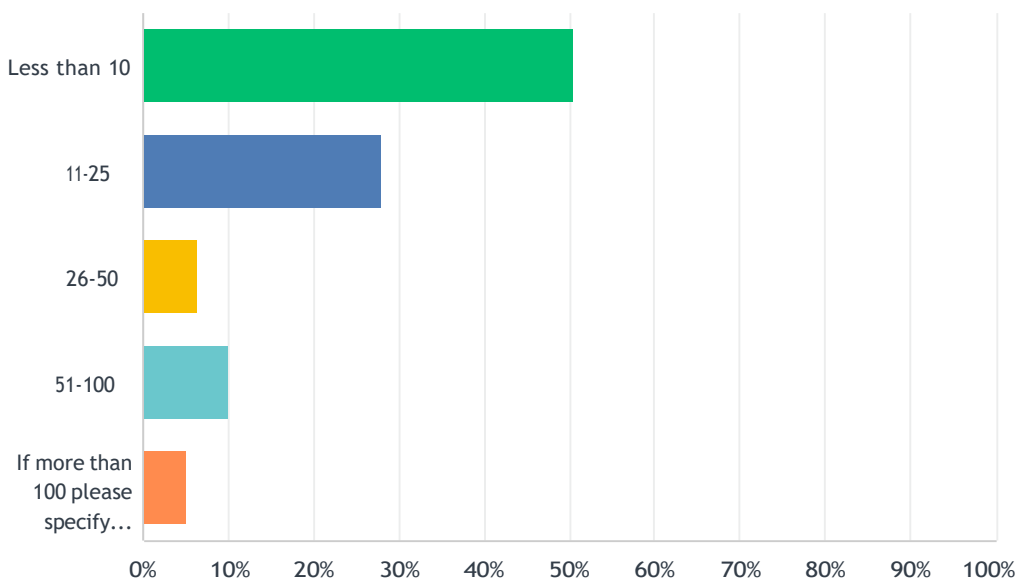
Answered: 83 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Below 10	15.66%	13
11-50	28.92%	24
51-100	14.46%	12
101-200	16.87%	14
201-500	18.07%	15
More than 500	1.20%	1
If more than 500 please specify number	4.82%	4
TOTAL		83

Q4 How many non-seasonal workers (long-term) do you employ?

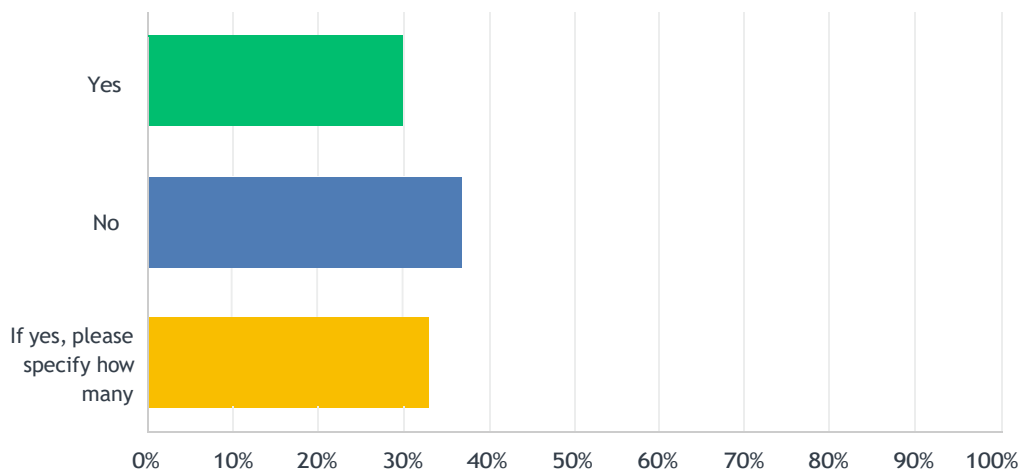
Answered: 79 Skipped: 4



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 10	50.63%	40
11-25	27.85%	22
26-50	6.33%	5
51-100	10.13%	8
If more than 100 please specify approximate number	5.06%	4
TOTAL		79

Q5 Do you currently employ visa holders in skilled roles?

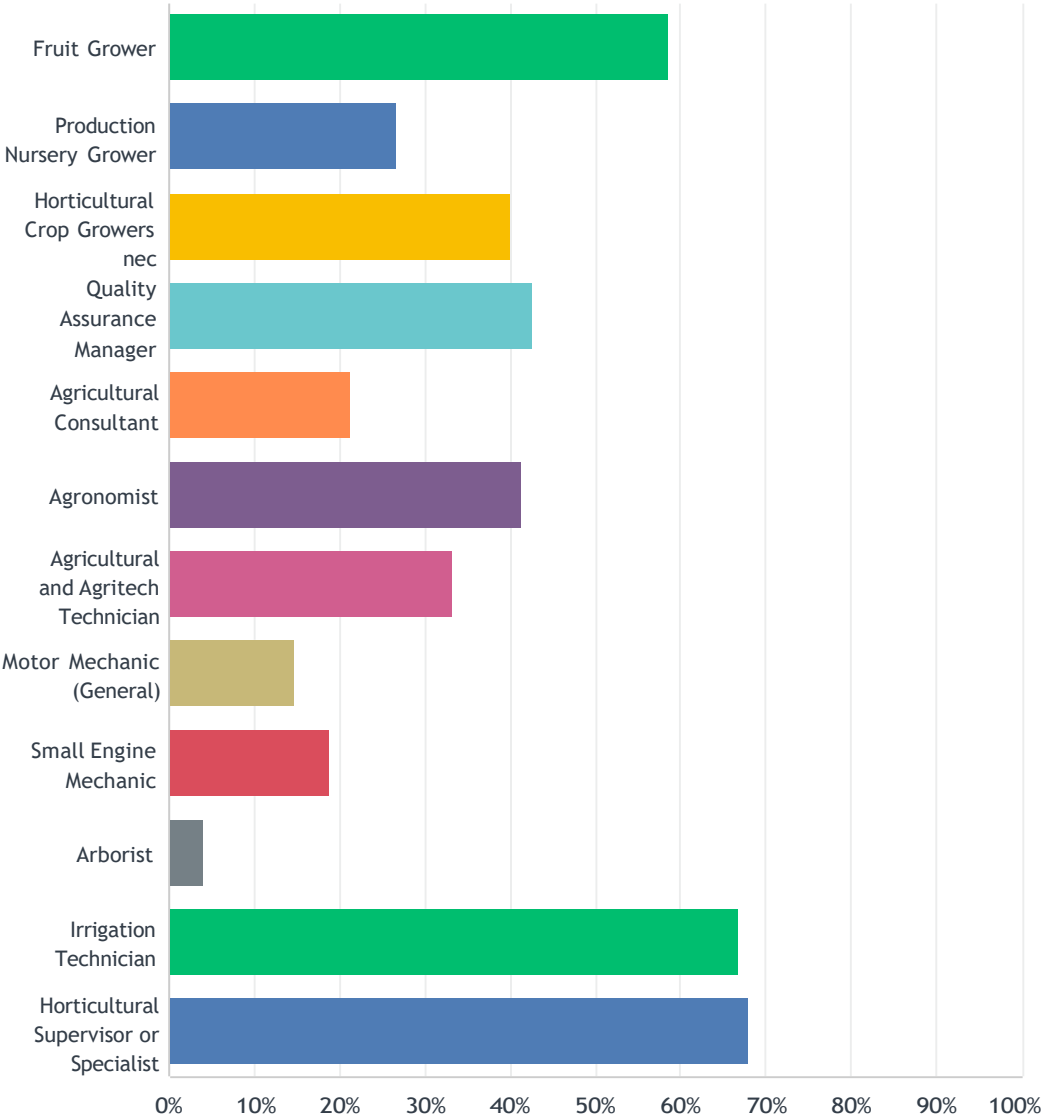
Answered: 81 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	29.63%	24
No	37.04%	30
If yes, please specify how many	33.33%	27
TOTAL		81

Q6 Would you be interested in recruiting skilled visa holders for any of the roles below (tick as many as apply) noting that you must try and first recruit Australians.

Answered: 75 Skipped: 8

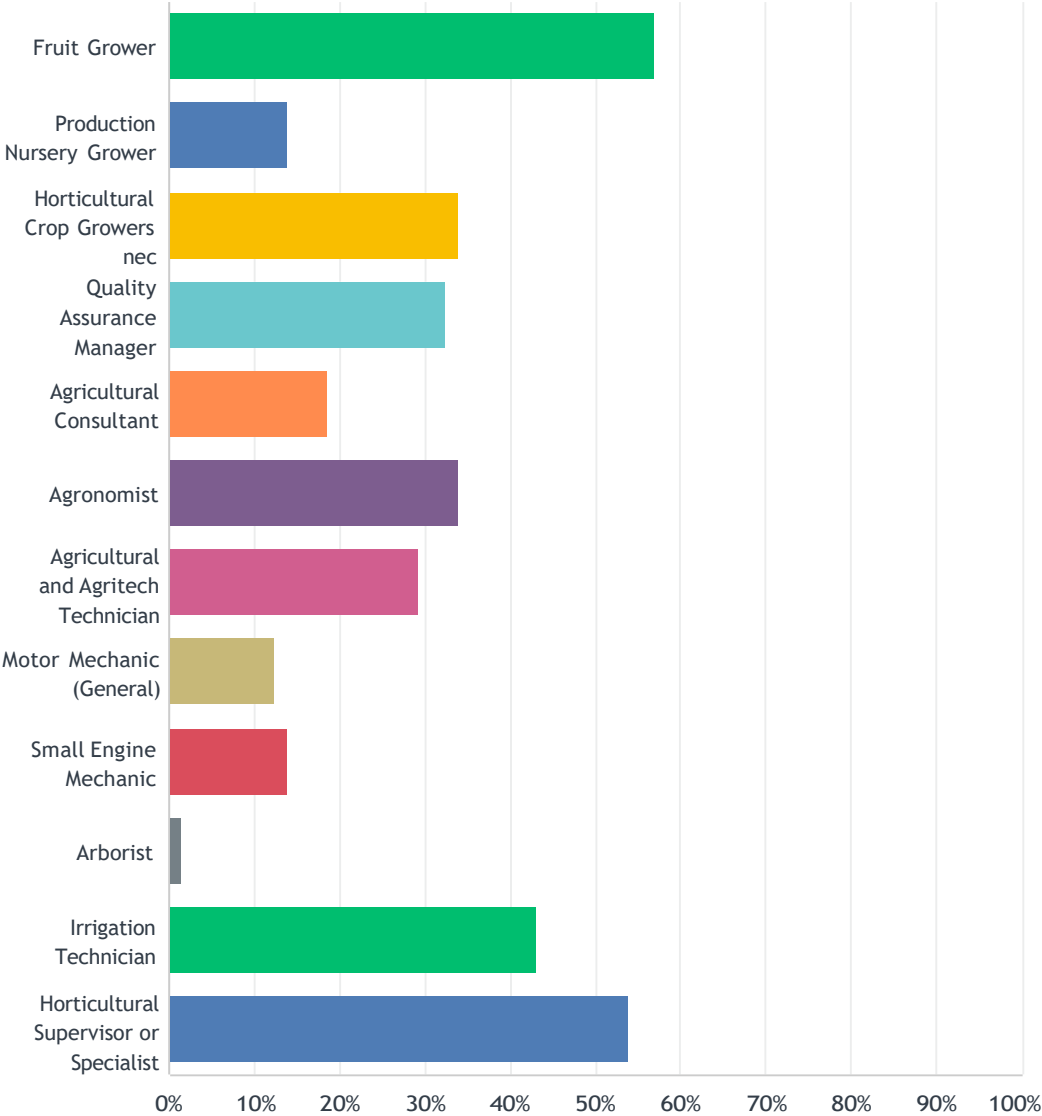


Core Skill Occupations List (CSOL) survey for Berries

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fruit Grower	58.67%	44
Production Nursery Grower	26.67%	20
Horticultural Crop Growers nec	40.00%	30
Quality Assurance Manager	42.67%	32
Agricultural Consultant	21.33%	16
Agronomist	41.33%	31
Agricultural and Agritech Technician	33.33%	25
Motor Mechanic (General)	14.67%	11
Small Engine Mechanic	18.67%	14
Arborist	4.00%	3
Irrigation Technician	66.67%	50
Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist	68.00%	51
Total Respondents: 75		

Q7 Considering these occupations, have you tried to recruit for any of these roles during the past three years? (tick all that apply)

Answered: 65 Skipped: 18

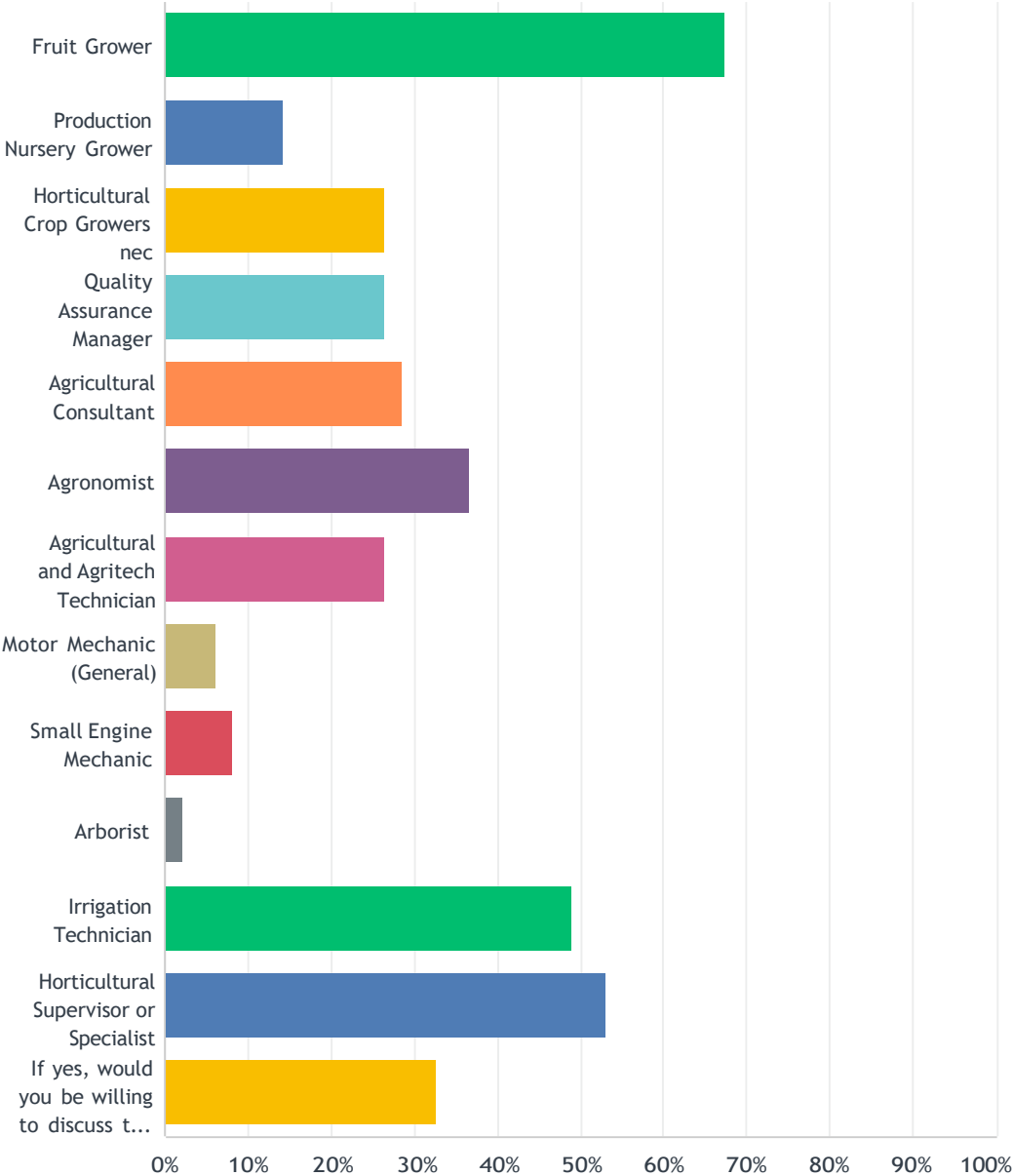


Core Skill Occupations List (CSOL) survey for Berries

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fruit Grower	56.92%	37
Production Nursery Grower	13.85%	9
Horticultural Crop Growers nec	33.85%	22
Quality Assurance Manager	32.31%	21
Agricultural Consultant	18.46%	12
Agronomist	33.85%	22
Agricultural and Agritech Technician	29.23%	19
Motor Mechanic (General)	12.31%	8
Small Engine Mechanic	13.85%	9
Arborist	1.54%	1
Irrigation Technician	43.08%	28
Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist	53.85%	35
Total Respondents: 65		

Q8 Have you done any labour market testing on any of these roles? (tick all that apply)

Answered: 49 Skipped: 34

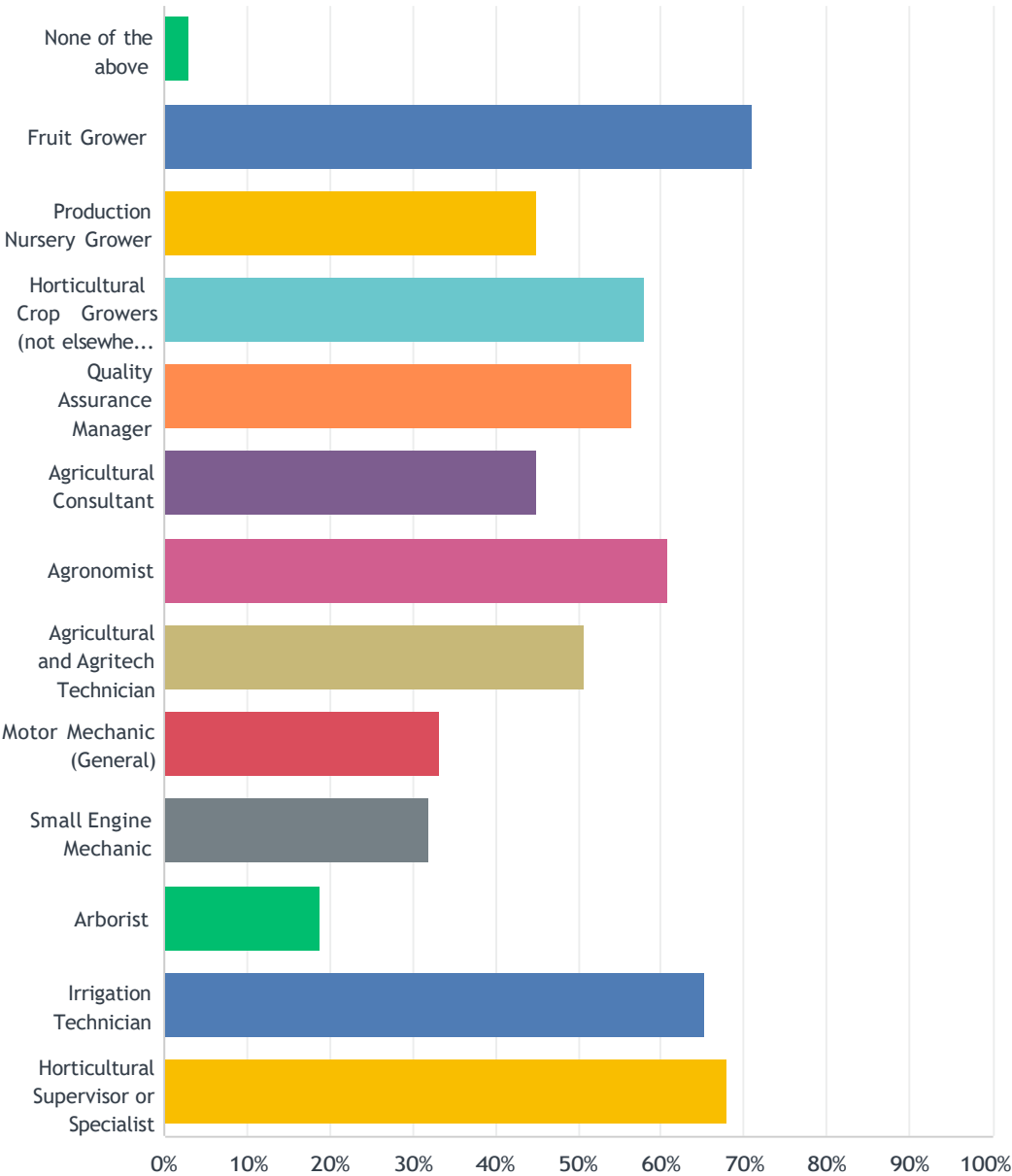


Core Skill Occupations List (CSOL) survey for Berries

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fruit Grower	67.35%	33
Production Nursery Grower	14.29%	7
Horticultural Crop Growers nec	26.53%	13
Quality Assurance Manager	26.53%	13
Agricultural Consultant	28.57%	14
Agronomist	36.73%	18
Agricultural and Agritech Technician	26.53%	13
Motor Mechanic (General)	6.12%	3
Small Engine Mechanic	8.16%	4
Arborist	2.04%	1
Irrigation Technician	48.98%	24
Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist	53.06%	26
If yes, would you be willing to discuss the results with Berries Australia to assist with our submission? Please insert contact details if yes	32.65%	16
Total Respondents: 49		

Q9 Which of these roles should be included on the occupation list?

Answered: 69 Skipped: 14

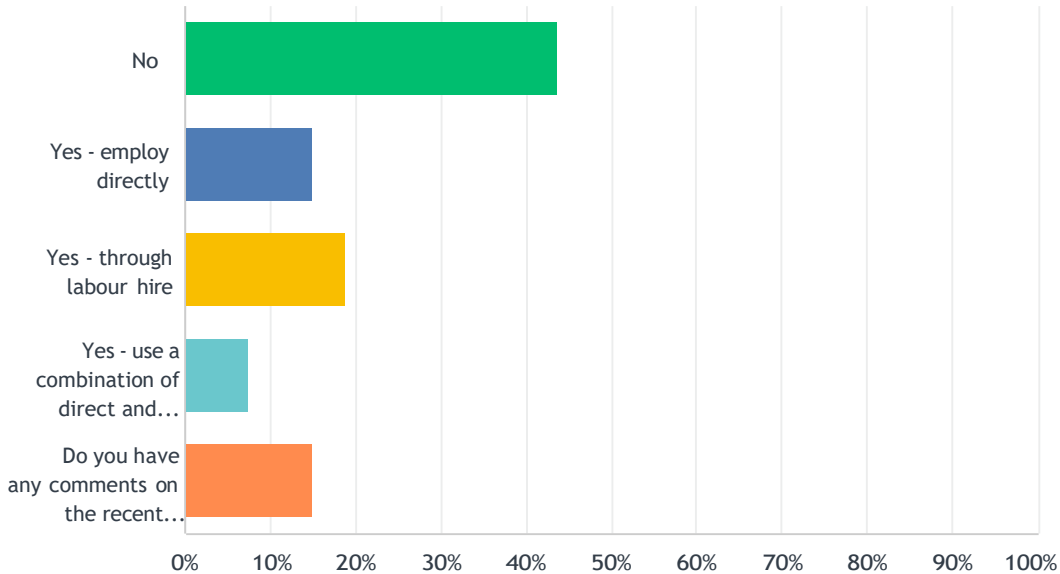


Core Skill Occupations List (CSOL) survey for Berries

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
None of the above	2.90%	2
Fruit Grower	71.01%	49
Production Nursery Grower	44.93%	31
Horticultural Crop Growers (not elsewhere classified)	57.97%	40
Quality Assurance Manager	56.52%	39
Agricultural Consultant	44.93%	31
Agronomist	60.87%	42
Agricultural and Agritech Technician	50.72%	35
Motor Mechanic (General)	33.33%	23
Small Engine Mechanic	31.88%	22
Arborist	18.84%	13
Irrigation Technician	65.22%	45
Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist	68.12%	47
Total Respondents: 69		

Q10 Do use PALM scheme workers?

Answered: 80 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	43.75%	35
Yes - employ directly	15.00%	12
Yes - through labour hire	18.75%	15
Yes - use a combination of direct and labour hire	7.50%	6
Do you have any comments on the recent amendments to the PALM scheme?	15.00%	12
TOTAL		80