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Jobs and Skills Australia
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To Whom it Concerns,

Draft Core Skills Occupations Lists — NFF Submission

The National Farmers Federation (**the NFF**) thanks you for this opportunity to make a submission to Jobs and Skills Australia (**JSA**) in respect of the Core Skills Occupations List (**CSOL**).

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and the length of the supply chain. Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

JSA will obviously be aware of the context of this submission, but to rehash very briefly, a centrepiece of the redesign of the skilled migration system which the current government announced on December 2023 will be a "core skills" visa pathway. In order to avail themselves of that pathway, a foreign worker (or local business) will need to satisfy the Department that they will have a job and work in Australia in an occupation which falls on a Core Skills Occupations List (**CSOL**). In about March 2023 JSA published a draft list (**the Draft List**) which was partitioned into three sub-lists consisting of occupations which are "definitely on" the final CSOL, occupations which are "definitely off" the CSOL, and occupations which will be "for consultation" before a decision is made regarding their inclusion (or not) on the CSOL.

It was with some concern the NFF and its membership noted that several farm occupations — many of which feature on the existing occupations lists — are marked for possible removal i.e. either marked as "for consultation"¹ or

¹ E.g. aquaculture farmer, flower grower, fruit or nut grower, grain, oilseed or pasture grower (Aus), grape grower, mixed crop farmer, crop farmers (nec), apiarist, dairy cattle farmer, goat farmer, mixed livestock farmer, pig farmer, mixed crop and livestock farmer, mechanical engineer, production or plant engineer, agricultural consultant, agricultural scientist, agricultural technician, meat inspector, motor mechanic (general), small engine mechanic, veterinary nurse, arborist.



“confident off”². Indeed, the only on-farm role which has found its way across from the existing occupations list to the “confident on” list is poultry farmer.

We understand that many affected farms have engaged with the online survey which JSA made available to employers who have a stake in the migration system. We further understand that a number of NFF commodity councils within the membership have made their own submission to JSA in relation to specific requirements of industries and the occupations which they need on the CSOL. We have had the opportunity to read submissions made by Australian Dairy Farmers, Grain Growers, Cotton Australia, Australian Pork Limited, and Berries Australia. We adopt and support the submission each of these bodies has made. We confine the NFF’s direct submissions to the broader themes which should inform the context of the decision-making process.

An important context, which we are sure will come through the submissions made by our members and the businesses we represent, is that migration pathways are a very important source of labour for the industry. That claim is certainly true of the non ‘skilled migration’ pathways (such as working holiday makers and the PALM scheme). However, it is equally true of the skilled pathways (such as TSS). According to public data published by the Department of Home Affairs³ as at 31 December 2023 Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery had 3,060 skilled migrant workers in Australia. That means that, purely by volume — i.e. based on the raw number of skilled migrant workers in the sector — we are the **ninth largest user** of skilled visa workers. Furthermore, as a proportion of our total workforce (based on ABS data⁴) we are the **third highest user** (after IT and before Mining and Hospitality). And to state the obvious, this does not include unregulated migrant workers such as backpackers and students who, in addition to picking and packing, are an extremely important but indeterminate (because they don’t record the numbers) source of (semi) skilled farm labour e.g. farm and station hands, header drivers, etc.

However, data to support claims beyond that broader picture is difficult to identify. It is also true that the shortage of granular data to support policy and decision making in relation to the farm workforce is a consistent source of problems for the industry. Indeed, just this week we made a submission to JSA’s *Food Supply Chain Capacity Study* which devoted an entire chapter to the issue. Those submissions followed a number of reports and initiatives which identify the problem or aspects of it, including, most recently, a *Mapping the Workforce of Australian Agriculture*’ study commissioned by AgriFutures. It is our expectation that these efforts will bear fruit in the near future, in the form of an up-to-date map of the ag’ sectors workforce and labour needs. However, at least at present it is difficult to demonstrate need based on recognised sources of data. Indeed,

² cotton grower, sugar cane grower, turf grower, vegetable grower (Aus) , beef cattle farmer, deer farmer, horse breeder, sheep farmer, livestock farmers (nec), forester, shearer, wool buyer.

³ *Temporary Resident (Skilled) Report* at 31 December 2023 - <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/work>

⁴ Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, 28 March 2024 - <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia-detailed/latest-release#data-downloads>).

as JSA is aware, many of the occupations listed on the “for consultation” list⁵ are new to the ANZSCO. As such, there will be very limited (within the context of broader paucity of data on the ag’ workforce) data on those occupations.

However, the historical fact is that the absence of these occupations from the ANZSCO led to numerous industry groups (ADF, APL, AusVeg) negotiating (or exploring) template industry labour agreements covering some or all of these roles. Furthermore, industry (including the NFF) long campaigned for ANZSCO to be revised to include these occupations, largely because their absence from ANZSCO meant that the need could be — and would, in practice, be — ignored in the development of government policy (especially in relation to migration) and this outcome was inconsistent with the experience of our members. In other words, the fact that they are new to ANZSCO is *prima facie* proof that there is a shortage of workers in these roles. In other words, even if there is limited *hard* evidence to suggest there is or is not a shortage of workers in these new occupations, the *soft* evidence suggest that there is indeed a need. In that context, it is far too early to exclude them from the new CSOL list.

Furthermore, this development of a CSOL followed the publication of a migration strategy less than 6 months ago which proposed a number of reforms to the migration system which could have very significant ramifications for the migrant labour market. However, most of those reforms have yet to be implemented and a great number are still in their very earliest development phases. Critically, the strategy calls for a significant review of the regional migration system. That review has yet to commence (at least in any public facing capacity) and we understand that it will occur over the course of the second half of 2024. It goes without saying that the outcome of that review will have significant ramifications for the agricultural sector which is largely based in the regions. Indeed, we are anticipating it will include at least a reconsideration of the role of workers who arrive via DAMAs and possibly industry labour agreements, and the work rights/incentives for students and working holiday makers in the regions. As is well known, these cohorts are very important to the ag’ sector, and not just in so-called unskilled roles. Indeed, even relatively settled programs are still in a state of flux e.g. the settings within the PALM program are still changing in ways which will affect a farmers’ capacity to engage with that scheme.

Given those circumstances, now is not the time to limit the options for engaging workers through the “standard” skill visa system. Any narrowing of these pathways or reduction in their numbers will have dramatic

⁵ 363111 Aquaculture Supervisor, 363112 Fishing Leading Hand, 363113 Forestry Operations Supervisor, 363114 Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist, 363115 Senior Broadacre Crop and Livestock Farm Worker, 363116 Senior Broadacre Crop Farm Worker, 363117 Vineyard Supervisor, 363199 Senior Aquaculture, Crop and Forestry Workers nec, 363211 Senior Beef Cattle Station Worker, 363212 Senior Cattle and Sheep Farm Worker, 363213 Senior Dairy Cattle Farm Worker, Grain, Oilseed, Pulse or Pasture Grower / Field Crop Grower, 363214 Senior Piggery Stockperson, 363215 Senior Sheep Farm Worker, 363299 Senior Livestock Farm Workers nec

consequences for the sector. As such, until the review has concluded and the 'dust has settled' any changes are premature at best.

One change which has (apparently) already occurred is the abolishment of a distinct "regional occupations list". As may be clear from the above, we are concerned that the unique needs and interests of the regions will be overshadowed and ignored by the more prominent needs and interests of urban centres and capital cities. The creation of a discrete regional occupations list recognised the fact that the regions have much thinner labour markets than urban centres. It is probably no coincidence that in disposing of this additional list, the CSOL proposes to remove (i.e. categorises them as "confident off") the agricultural occupations which are regionally focused e.g. cotton grower, sugar cane grower, vegetable farmer, beef cattle farmer, sheep farmer, and shearer. Although presumably the intent is for the new CSOL to be sensitive enough to account for regional labour needs in addition to those of the capital cities, we are concerned it will result in a one-size-fits all approach which fails to recognise the needs of the regions (where most agriculture is based).

Immigration is *critically* important to the sector's supply of labour. As such, in addition to impacting business viability, animal welfare, and worker wellbeing, it has a broader impact on the cost of living and supermarket prices. In the worst case, a lack of labour will result in farmers walking away from the industry. In a recent NFF survey more than half of farmers surveyed said they would consider switching commodities or leaving the industry altogether if access to workers was reduced.

Given those concerns, we would implore JSA not to remove those agricultural occupations which currently feature on the occupations lists, at least for the time being. If JSA determines to remove occupations from the list, we would ask that you contact the relevant industry group to explain the position. Where that decision departs from the position which has been expressed by our members, we need to understand the rationale and be in a position to explain why to the sector.

Regards,

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[Redacted contact information]