

New seasonal work scheme introduced that will let workers from the Pacific region fill seasonal horticulture and viticulture jobs when no New Zealanders are available.

Briefly: -

Up to 5,000 workers from Pacific island nations (Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) will have preferential access to come to New Zealand on seven-month seasonal annual permits from April 2007 to work in horticulture and viticulture jobs, to address a chronic labour shortage. Workers will also be able to return to New Zealand for the following season.

Employers will have to :

- register with the Department of Labour
- show Work and Income they have made every effort to recruit workers locally and that they cannot find New Zealand workers to do the seasonal jobs they need done.
- show that they are good employers before being able to recruit migrant workers
- meet half the bill for transporting people from the Pacific (airfares) – the worker pays the other half
- pay for their accommodation
- guarantee pay for at least 240 hours of work
- offer pastoral care - including suitable accommodation, translation, and transport where appropriate
- make sure workers return home at the end of the season (or may be subject to fines and may lose their registered employer status)
- pay the costs for removing workers from New Zealand if they overstay

The Council of Trade Unions planned to make sure that not only the employment rights of the workers were upheld - but also wider social protections, including access to public healthcare.

A seasonal work permit was introduced last December to help meet peak labour needs in the horticulture and viticulture industries. Since then, 4087 such permits have been approved for people from abroad, with Brazil topping the list on 1272. Malaysia is second on 679, and the Czech Republic is third on 385. Under the new scheme, it is likely these people will be gradually replaced with Pacific Islands workers.

The Government says it is giving Pacific people priority as temporary migrants because of NZ's "special relationship" with and commitment to the Pacific region. People from outside the region visiting on working holiday visas will still be able to work as fruit-pickers.

Workers from countries with a high risk of TB will be tested before being issued with a visa. Standard character requirements must also be met. Work is under way to see if further health testing is needed.

Thousands of Pacific Islanders are signing up in a mass protest against New Zealand's immigration law. Pacific islanders are proposing that the government offer a twelve month visa.

The full story : -

The scheme, announced on Wednesday by Social Development and Employment Minister David Benson-Pope and Immigration Minister David Cunliffe, will allow up to 5,000 workers from Pacific island nations to come to New Zealand on seven-month seasonal annual permits from April 2007 to work in horticulture and viticulture jobs, to address a chronic seasonal labour shortage that is said to have cost more than \$30 million in lost export earnings in the past year.

The Government says employers will have to register with the Department of Labour. As well, they will have to show Work and Income they have made every effort to recruit workers locally and that they are good employers before being able to recruit migrant workers.

Employers will have to meet half the bill for transporting people from the Pacific and also pay for their accommodation.

It will be up to employers to make sure workers return home at the end of the season.

The latest figures show that about 19,500 people have overstayed. Mr Cunliffe says it will be the employer's responsibility to make sure workers do not add to that figure.

The horticulture industry is also anxious to keep the seasonal work permit scheme that has helped it to fill short-term picking and packing peaks.

"This new scheme will be important in enabling the horticulture and viticulture industries to meet their growth targets and I would expect major sectors to have key roles in this area to ensure it meets employer needs and is practical and workable.

"This is a policy that has great potential for a 'win-win' outcome by helping New Zealand employers while at the same time enhancing the special New Zealand association and interest in the South Pacific region," said Mr Woolerton.

The Government is promising tight controls on its new Pacific Island seasonal work permit programme, amid concern that the scheme might lead to more overstayers.

But while they will be required to return home after seven months of work in New Zealand, the Government admits there is a risk some might want to stay on longer, illegally.

Immigration Minister David Cunliffe said yesterday that to reduce that risk, the new policy included funding for additional compliance and enforcement officers.

"If they do not [return home], the registered employer may be subject to fines and may lose their registered employer status," Mr Cunliffe said.

To take part in the scheme, employers must first show that they cannot find New Zealand workers to do the seasonal jobs they need done. Typically, this work includes planting, pruning and picking.

National's immigration spokesman, Lockwood Smith, said yesterday that while his party was concerned about New Zealand's skills shortage, Labour's track record with overstayers "is woeful".

"New Zealand needs these workers ... but it must be a two-way street - if they breach our immigration laws they must be shown the door smartly," Dr Smith said.

The Council of Trade Unions, meanwhile, said it planned to make sure that not only the employment rights of the workers were upheld - but also wider social protections, including access to public healthcare.

SHARING THE FRUITS: THE NEW PROGRAMME

What happens under the scheme?

Pacific workers will have preferential access to seasonal jobs in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture sectors - but employers must first show that they cannot get New Zealanders for the job. Up to 5000 workers from all Pacific Islands Forum nations can be recruited each season. Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu will get early help to prepare workers, so employers can access labour quickly. Workers will be able to stay for a maximum of seven months, and then must return home.

Why is the programme being launched?

New Zealand's unemployment rate is at a record low and market gardeners and orchardists are struggling to get pickers and pruners. Backpackers on working holiday schemes do take up fruit-picking jobs, but don't always stay for the whole season.

Don't we already have a seasonal permit scheme?

Yes. A seasonal work permit was introduced last December to help meet peak labour needs in the horticulture and viticulture industries. Since then, 4087 such permits have been approved for people from abroad, with Brazil topping the list on 1272. Malaysia is second on 679, and the Czech Republic is third on 385. Under the new scheme, it is likely these people will be gradually replaced with Pacific Islands workers.

Why are Pacific people being favoured?

The Government says it is giving Pacific people priority as temporary migrants because of NZ's "special relationship" with and commitment to the Pacific region. People from outside the region visiting on working holiday visas will still be able to work as fruit-pickers.

Who will pay?

Employers will have to pay half of the travel costs for workers flying to and from New Zealand. The worker pays the other half. Employers must guarantee pay for at least 240 hours of work, and also offer pastoral care - including suitable accommodation, translation, and transport where appropriate. Employers must also commit to paying the costs for removing workers from New Zealand if they overstay.

What will be done to reduce the overstaying risk?

The Government hopes the permit's seven-month duration means employees will maintain close ties with their home countries. Workers will also be able to return to New Zealand for the following season, so the temptation to stay illegally may be reduced. Employers face a financial penalty if their workers overstay, and the Government is putting more money into compliance and enforcement measures.

Will there be any testing of the migrants?

Workers from countries with a high risk of TB will be tested before being issued with a visa. Standard character requirements must also be met. Work is under way to see if further health testing is needed.

Reaction - here

Business leaders are concerned the new scheme to recruit seasonal workers from the Pacific could result in more overstayers. The New Zealand Pacific Business Council says there are flaws in the Government's plan to allow up to 5,000 workers to fill temporary jobs in the horticulture and viticulture industries.

Chairman Gilbert Ullrich believes there should be an independent trust holding a significant portion of the workers' pay. The money would either be remitted to their homeland, or released once the worker leaves New Zealand. He says the scheme must have proper controls to ensure the workers do not become overstayers.

Reaction – and there

Thousands of Pacific Islanders are signing up in a mass protest against New Zealand's immigration law. They say the current immigration laws are a failure and are backing a proposal for dramatic changes.

At the top of the list are work visas. At the moment a job offer is needed in order to get a visa, but some Pacific Islanders have found that potential employers are put off by the process required by the government in order to hire a person.

Community leaders say it is an outrage Pacific Islanders can not get jobs while employers are crying out over a labour shortage. "Unemployed New Zealanders don't want to go and do that work. We have a big army in the Pacific that's quite prepared to come and do that work," says proposal organiser Arthur Anae.

Pacific islanders are proposing that the government offer a twelve month visa. They say there would be necessary criteria they would have to meet such as medical insurance and police clearance - as well as no access to benefits and immediate deportation if visa holders break the law.

The Pacific community will present their proposal to government later this week as the government mounts a review of its immigration policy.

www.winejobsonline.com

New Zealand's own specialist wine jobs, jobseekers and networking employment website especially for wine industry people.
Run by New Zealanders with personal experience in the wine industry.