

AGRICULTURE — PACIFIC LABOUR SCHEME AND SEASONAL WORKER PROGRAMME

54. Hon COLIN TINCKNELL to the Minister for Regional Development:

I am aware that chronic labour shortages on farms throughout Western Australia still exist. I also refer to the government's significant funding efforts towards facilitating agricultural training through various schemes such as Work and Wander Out Yonder, subsidised accommodation, free skillset offerings at Muresk, TAFE transport operator training, and funding the multicultural services Australia training to get migrants working in the regions. How many additional workers have been retained in the regions through these schemes, and does the government believe that these have been successful in their approach?

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN replied:

I thank the member for the question. However, I just want him to appreciate that this is an issue all around Australia. The fundamental problem is that we have a global pandemic on and we cannot bring people in. We have all understood that that will be a challenge. The number of backpackers across Australia has gone down from 137 000 to some 36 000. We can see that that has been a real decline. We cannot make new people, but we can do everything we can to encourage Western Australians to go out and do that work, and to some extent we have been successful. We are not saying that this solves the whole problem. We cannot do the Pol Pot thing and go down with a gun and make people go out of the city and pick fruit. It is not going to happen.

Our incentive scheme has managed to attract quite a few people. To date, we have made payments for 1 152 applicants. That is a considerable amount. That has resulted in about \$1.5 million going out. I am very pleased to see that. One of the reasons that our scheme has been successful is that it has not been very bureaucratic. People do not need to have lots of receipts; they just have to show that they have been employed. The commonwealth government scheme has not really worked, but it has recently announced changes to make that more workable, and that should help.

I am proud of what we have achieved with the Seasonal Worker Programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme. So far, in some very challenging environments, 786 seasonal workers have come into Western Australia, and they are doing a fantastic job in all parts of the state, from Albany all the way up to Kununurra and over to Broome. The next flight has been approved for May, there are two for June, and one for July. At the end of July, that will mean we will have 1 400 workers, principally from Vanuatu and Tonga. I do not have the precise numbers on the projects that are being run by Muresk and TAFE, and I will get those for the member, but they have certainly had a great take-up of both the harvest operations program using the simulator at Muresk and the heavy vehicle driving operations skills program. We have not been able to work out what the multicultural program is, but I can say that our goldfields migrant scheme has really been successful. We have 69 people from basically African and Middle Eastern backgrounds who are now working in Kalgoorlie.