

**Submission
No 6**

**INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY
TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND
REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Murray River Council

Date Received: 20 January 2025

18 January 2025

Mr. Joe McGirr MLA
Chairman

Inquiry into Modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales
NSW Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir

INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES - SUBMISSION

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this important inquiry.

Murray River Council spans an area of 11,865 square kilometres, is home to 13,326 residents and is located in the southern Riverina - 800km south of Sydney and 205km north of Melbourne where the Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing industry sector makes the greatest contribution to economic output in the region.

This industry sector is also the largest employer with 1,167 jobs representing 24.01% of total employment within the region.

The horticulture industry is mainly situated in the western part of the council area; however, it spans both sides of the New South Wales – Victoria border between Murray Downs - Swan Hill and Mildura - Wentworth region and is a vital part of the regional economy, bringing not only wealth to the area but also contributing, a combined total of over \$2 billion to Australia's GDP.

The horticultural industry is a major employer in this area; however, it continues to experience workforce shortages which, in the main, can only be filled through the employment of overseas workers.

Unfortunately, despite the introduction of migrant worker schemes such as the 'Seasonal Worker Programme', the 'Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme' and the 'Designated Area Migration Agreement' scheme (DAMA) it appears that our visa system does not cope well with the influx of large numbers of overseas workers to this region.

Despite the implementation of these schemes and having robust regulatory frameworks in place to protect migrant workers, significant workforce shortages persist across Australia.

This situation is a constant challenge for growers in the region and provides an opportunity for unscrupulous actors to attract and trap unsuspecting and desperate workers with false promises of untold wealth and permanent resident status in Australia.

Overseas workers in the Murray River and Swan Hill area have told of their experiences where these operators place elaborate posts on their overseas Facebook pages, promoting wealth and a luxurious lifestyle on arriving in Australia.

On contacting the operator, the applicant will often pay as much as \$7000 for a return airfare, tourist visa and the promise of a job and accommodation in Australia. This is money that the applicant can ill-afford, and they often have no option but to borrow money from their families. Others have told of borrowing the money and paying up to 20% on bank loans.

After arriving in Australia, they find that their accommodation is substandard, often crowded and are charged substantial amounts by the operator for this privilege. One worker has told of the fact that they are living in a house with twelve other people with only one bathroom/toilet, one washing machine and one refrigerator. The worker then finds out that their tourist visa does not have work rights, and they are advised to either apply for a protection visa that will allow them to work or to just work illegally.

This is not a situation that the worker has made by choice, these circumstances have been forced upon them, created and manipulated by the unscrupulous operator for his gain only.

Workers state that they have been in Australia for 2 years but still owe many thousands of dollars for the loans that they have taken out and their greatest fear is that they will be deported, returning home to their families in shame, having been duped and financially ruined.

They are unaware that once a protection visa has been granted, that they can access Medicare, are required to lodge a yearly tax return, which may result in a tax refund, and are able to access their superannuation upon exiting the country.

Statutory declarations attached to this submission are factual accounts provided by overseas workers currently residing in the Murray region and living the nightmare situation described above.

Despite the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act and various initiatives by state governments, it is clear that some overseas workers have been lured, under false pretences, to a 'better life' in Australia only to find themselves trapped in situations that are entirely different to that promised.

Also, the lived experience of a number of overseas workers living in the Murray River Council area are attached to this submission in the form of statutory declarations.

Murray River Council would like the enquiry to consider the following recommendations.

This information has been provided 'WITHOUT PREJUDICE' and if the committee wishes to publish or quote any of the information contained in the statutory declarations, the declarants ask that all names be redacted first.

Recommendation

1. Murray River Council would like to recommend that the issuing of visas to temporary migrant workers be centralised and administered by the federal government, the process simplified, and third-party agencies removed from the system.

Employers or groups of employers working cooperatively together, should apply directly to that office stating the number of workers required, the nature of the work involved, the period of employment, provide details of proposed rates of pay, and accommodation details including cost.

Migrant workers should apply directly to that office seeking suitable employment matching and issuing of the appropriate visa.

The migrant worker should arrange and pay for their return fare.

Welfare checks should be conducted by local government officers within the first month of employment and as required thereafter.

2. An overseas migrant information leaflet should be developed and issued with the visa notification. The leaflet should contain important phone numbers including emergency services and a departmental advice hotline, information about Medicare, lodging of annual tax returns and accessing their superannuation funds.

Should you require further information, please contact Cr Neil Gorey, Deputy Mayor, on

Yours sincerely,

Cr Neil Gorey
Deputy Mayor