



Managing Worker Wellbeing during COVID-19: Pacific Seasonal Workers in Australia and New Zealand

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Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic early in 2020 and associated border closures worldwide were accompanied by unprecedented disruptions in the flows of temporary labour between sending and destination countries. As with elsewhere in the world, in the Pacific region, countries including Australia and New Zealand closed their international borders, bringing an abrupt end to existing patterns of mobility.

There is now an extensive literature on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on global migration patterns.¹ For international migrant workers, of which there were an estimated 164 million in 2017 (ILO 2018), the pandemic presented significant challenges to health, livelihoods and mobility. In many countries, migrant workers make up a sizeable share of the workforce 'on the front lines', carrying out jobs in essential sectors such as health, aged care, transport, construction and agriculture (ILO 2020).

Measures such as border closures, quarantine and travel restrictions enacted by countries to control COVID-19 transmission disrupted transport networks and people's ability to move. For some migrant workers, border closures meant they were unable to enter a destination country for work. For others, travel restrictions meant they were stuck in a host country and unable to return home. The implications for migrant workers and their families have been significant, as many rely on incomes earned overseas and remittances to support livelihoods at home (Moroz et al. 2020).

This paper focuses on the disruptions to the flows of seasonal labour between Pacific island countries (and Timor-Leste) and Australia and New Zealand under their respective seasonal work schemes during 2020 and the first half of 2021. New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, introduced in 2007, and Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), implemented in 2012, allow workers from eligible Pacific island countries to enter each year for short-term seasonal work, mainly in horticulture.²

Both schemes have the dual objectives of supporting the seasonal labour needs of their

domestic horticulture industries and contributing to the economic development of participating countries through workers' earnings and remittances. Many workers welcome the opportunity to return to Australia or New Zealand for multiple seasons of work (subject to reselection by the employer) to earn a regular source of income for their families. RSE/SWP worker return rates are around 60 per cent (Bedford et al. 2020; Howes 23/2/2018). For RSE- and SWP-approved employers, a major benefit of participation is the guaranteed supply of a stable, productive and experienced seasonal workforce.³

Policy settings under the RSE and SWP dictate that workers are issued with an employer-specific, limited purpose visa that ties their legal status in-country to employment with their approved RSE/SWP employer.⁴ Workers cannot choose to find alternative employment. Under both schemes, approved employers must meet a range of employment and welfare obligations to be eligible to participate and recruit Pacific seasonal workers.⁵

When New Zealand and Australia closed their international borders in late March 2020 in response to the pandemic, around 18,000 seasonal workers were undertaking short-term seasonal work contracts, with approximately 11,000 in New Zealand and just over 7000 in Australia, the majority of whom were from the Pacific.^{6,7} The ensuing travel restrictions meant many workers were unable to return home when their original contracts were due to expire. Instead, they were required to spend extended periods in the host country, far beyond the maximum of seven (RSE)⁸ to nine (SWP) months they are usually entitled to work each year.

By August 2021, almost 18 months later, approximately 4500 SWP workers who had entered prior to March 2020 remained in Australia, and around 3500 Pacific RSE workers were still in New Zealand.

For SWP- and RSE-approved employers (hereafter, employers), who are responsible for their workers' welfare, 2020-21 proved challenging. Employers tried to keep their Pacific seasonal workers in full-time employment while managing their own demands for seasonal labour through peak harvest and off-peak periods and, in some instances, changes in demand

for their horticultural products. For Pacific seasonal workers, the year was filled with uncertainty and change. This was largely linked to the availability of work and the uncertain ability to earn a regular seasonal work income, all without the prospect of being able to return home. Workers were also coping with much longer than anticipated absences from

family and concerns about the wellbeing of family members in the islands. The combination of these factors contributed to an increased incidence of welfare issues among the SWP and RSE workforces, as reported by participants involved in this research.

Table 1. Stakeholder interviews, Australia and New Zealand

Stakeholder	Australia		New Zealand	
	Interviews	Participants	Interviews	Participants
RSE/SWP employers	9	9	14	20
RSE/SWP team leaders	13	13	3	4
SWP workers who abandoned their approved employment	4	4	-	-
Horticulture industry representatives	3	4	4	7
Government officials*	2	5	4	8
Pacific Country Liaison Officers**	4	4	2	3
Pacific Labour Facility staff***	1	2	-	-
Unions	2	2	-	-
Pacific labour agents	1	1	-	-
Community informants:				
• health providers	-	-	1	2
• training providers	-	-	2	3
• accommodation and pastoral care hosts	2	2	5	8
• non-government organisations	-	-	2	2
• church leaders	2	2	-	-
• members of Pacific island community organisations and diaspora communities	5	7	1	2
• other community informants linked to the horticulture industry	1	1	4	11
TOTAL	49	56	42	70

*Government officials in Australia include the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Employment, Skills and Education. In New Zealand, they include the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

**Pacific Country Liaison Officers are funded by their respective Pacific governments to support worker wellbeing in Australia and New Zealand.

***The Pacific Labour Facility is contracted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to oversee the operation of Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme.

This paper examines responses to the pandemic in Australia and New Zealand, with particular reference to a range of stakeholder efforts to manage the wellbeing of Pacific seasonal workers who remained in both countries following the March 2020 border closures. Primary data for the study was collected via key informant interviews between October and December 2020. A total of 91 interviews with over 126 participants were conducted across the two countries, either in person, via telephone or using online methods (Zoom and Messenger), which worked well. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the different stakeholder groups included in the study, the number of interviews conducted and the number of participants in each interview. Informal follow-up discussions took place with many of the participants engaged in this research during the first six months of 2021 as we continued to monitor the wellbeing of Pacific workers who remained in Australia and New Zealand.

The paper is in three sections. Part 1 provides an overview of the situation in March 2020 when borders closed, including the initial immigration measures implemented to regularise the stay of onshore temporary migrants. Efforts by employers and horticulture industry groups to keep RSE and SWP workers in full-time employment are discussed, along with the availability of financial assistance to those with little or no work.

Part 2 discusses Pacific seasonal workers' wellbeing during 2020 and early 2021 and includes a review of some of the support measures that were implemented to assist workers, including efforts to return workers to their home countries. Rather than providing a comparative analysis of the two countries'

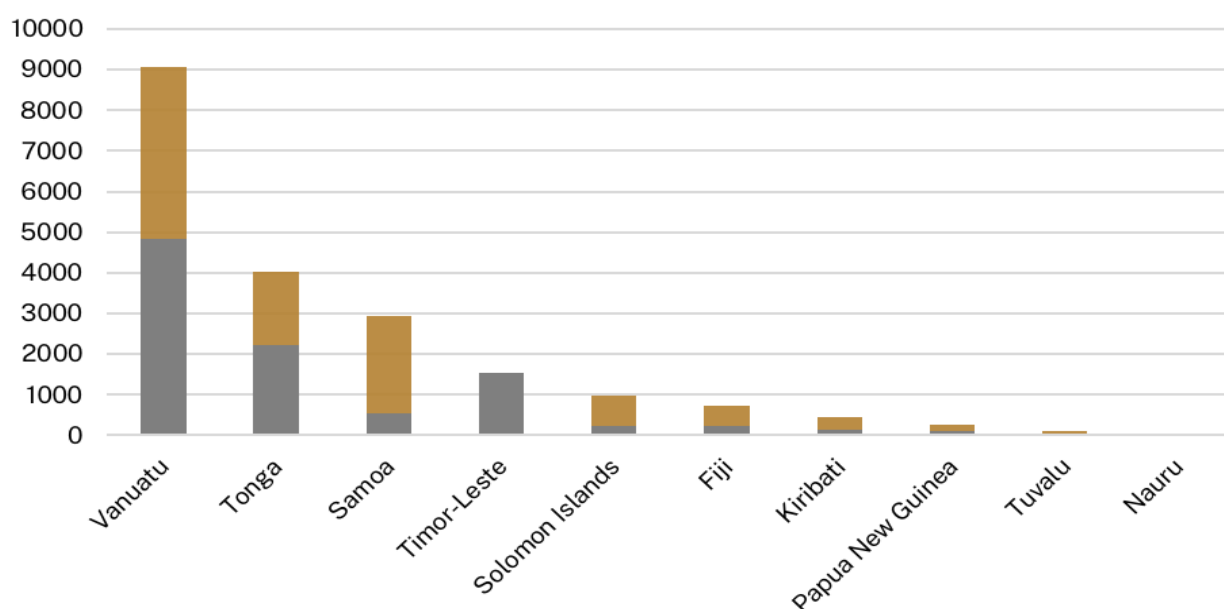
approaches, which is not necessarily helpful given the different contexts in which the two seasonal work schemes operate,⁹ the aim is to highlight the range of responses in Australia and New Zealand to support the wellbeing of Pacific seasonal workers.

Part 3 outlines developments during the 2021/22 season (1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022), with the resumption of Pacific seasonal labour flows into Australia and New Zealand, as well as a series of policy reforms in Australia that will transform Australia's Pacific labour mobility schemes in future. The paper concludes with a brief summary of some of the main shifts in thinking that have occurred in light of pandemic experiences around how best to support the wellbeing of Pacific seasonal workers, who provide an essential source of temporary labour to the Australian and New Zealand horticulture industries.¹⁰

Part 1. Supporting Pacific seasonal workers during the pandemic

When international borders closed in Australia and New Zealand late in March 2020, sizeable numbers of temporary migrants were onshore in both countries. Over two million temporary visa holders were in Australia (Department of Home Affairs 2022b), while approximately 350,000 temporary migrants were in New Zealand. Among those temporarily onshore were approximately 18,000 seasonal workers under the two countries' respective seasonal work schemes. With a major reduction in international air travel in line with global COVID-19-related travel restrictions,¹¹ temporary migrants faced the prospect of being unable to readily return home.

Figure 1. SWP approvals and Pacific RSE arrivals by country, 1 July 2019 to 20 March 2020



Note: The numbers of Nauruan citizens participating in the SWP and RSE are small. In 2019/20, there were five Nauruan RSE arrivals and no approvals under the SWP.

Sources: Department of Home Affairs, unpublished data June 2021; Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, unpublished data August 2020.

Figure 1 shows SWP approvals and Pacific RSE worker arrivals between 1 July 2019 and 20 March 2020, when borders closed. Vanuatu is the largest supplier of seasonal labour under both schemes, followed by Tonga and Samoa. Timor-Leste is also a significant source of SWP labour but is not a participating country in the RSE scheme.

An immediate response by both governments to the unfolding crisis posed by their respective border closures was to regularise the length of stay of the major classes of temporary visa holders, including seasonal workers, to ensure their legal entitlement to remain. The New Zealand government's approach was quite straight forward. On 2 April 2020, all temporary visas, including RSE visas, were extended until 25 September, with a subsequent blanket extension until March 2021 (Immigration New Zealand 2022b).

In Australia, rather than extending SWP visas (subclass 403) under the same conditions, on 4 April 2020 it was announced that SWP workers could instead apply for a 12-month Temporary Activity (subclass 408) visa for employment in critical sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² In the interim, workers were automatically transferred to a bridging visa to legally extend their stay.¹³

Similar to the governments of other countries during the pandemic, the Australian and New Zealand governments designated various sectors, including agricultural production, as 'essential', enabling them to continue operating during lockdown periods (whereby people were unable to move outside their usual places of residence to prevent COVID-19 transmission). Employers were required to implement strict hygiene, physical distancing and health and safety measures to enable workers to remain in their 'bubbles', or isolation groups, on worksites, as well as in their daily transport to and from work and in their accommodation. As long as COVID-19 protocols were observed, SWP and RSE workers could continue performing horticultural jobs both during lockdowns and the associated easing of restrictions (Bedford 9/7/2020).

These early measures were critical first steps in supporting employers and their workers in the initial weeks following the border closures. However, a complex situation was starting to unfold around managing the supply and demand of seasonal labour for peak harvest periods, including facilitating the movement of workers between states (Australia) and regions (New Zealand) and managing the health and wellbeing of the thousands of Pacific seasonal workers who found themselves caught in both countries and unable to return home.

Availability of seasonal work

Keeping RSE/SWP workers gainfully employed in the months following the border closures was a priority for employers, industry groups and government agencies — not only to meet industry labour needs, but also to ensure workers continued to have a regular source of income to cover their living costs, save and remit money to support their island-based families.

As noted, RSE/SWP workers are issued with employer-specific visas that tie their lawful status in-country to employment with their approved employer. In New Zealand, there is a well-established system for employers to share their workers with other approved employers via joint agreement-to-recruit (ATR) arrangements.¹⁴ In Australia on the other hand, up until early 2020 there was no comparable policy setting that allowed SWP employers to share workers under a multi-sponsorship agreement, unless under exceptional circumstances, such as an SWP employer failing to meet minimum hours of work or wage rates, or serious employment disputes.¹⁵

During 2020, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), which oversaw the SWP at the time, implemented new measures to provide employers with greater flexibility to share seasonal labour in an effort to ensure SWP workers remained in regular, full-time employment.¹⁶ This was not, however, a straightforward process, especially when it involved interstate travel at a time when individual states were implementing their own border restrictions and quarantine requirements in response to COVID-19 cases.¹⁷

New Zealand

In New Zealand, RSE workers are predominantly employed for seasonal work in the production of kiwifruit, wine grapes and pipfruit (mostly apples and pears), the country's three largest horticultural exports.¹⁸ When the border closed on 19 March 2020, the pipfruit harvest was at its height, the kiwifruit harvest was getting underway and it was about a month before the autumn and winter pruning of grape vines commenced.

The great majority of the 11,151 RSE workers who had arrived between 1 July 2019 and 19 March 2020 were still in the country when the border closed; only a small number (under 200) had already returned home on completion of their contracts.¹⁹ Of the 10,989 RSE workers onshore, none were certain when they would be able to return to their home countries.

April and May were busy months, with the apple and kiwifruit harvests providing plenty of work for RSE workers. By late June, however, the apple and kiwifruit harvests had come to an end and demand for seasonal workers dropped. With over 9700 RSE workers in the country at the start of June, no established repatriation pathways to Pacific countries and demand for only 6000 to 7000 workers for the pruning of kiwifruit and grapes from July to September, the horticulture industry faced an oversupply of around 3000 workers (Bedford 9/7/2020).

Major efforts were made by individual employers, and the horticulture industry more widely, to share RSE workers between employers and regions in order to keep workers in full-time employment. For employers with small numbers of RSE workers,²⁰ or with sharp seasonal peaks and without existing sharing arrangements with other employers, it was difficult to find sufficient work to meet the RSE policy requirement of at least 30 hours' work each week.²¹

Finding sufficient work often meant RSE workers were performing tasks for which they had never been trained (for example, apple pickers pruning grape vines), often moving to new employers in different locations. On the one hand, workers were able to experience other seasonal employment opportunities and their associated accommodation and work conditions with different employers, thus becoming more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their regular RSE work arrangements. However, workers were often required to move to new communities with which they had no previously established connections (for example, through the church), which contributed to feelings of isolation (Bailey 2020).

Employers, meanwhile, found that they had to train RSE workers with little or no prior experience. While tasks were completed, they were not done with the speed or proficiency of the experienced RSE recruits normally employed for winter work, but who had been unable to enter the country after 19 March 2020. The RSE labour contractors interviewed noted that this was particularly an issue when outsourcing workers to clients who had expectations around the standard of work that would be achieved. While RSE contractors had been able to 'muddle through' the 2020 winter pruning season, they were concerned about the prospect of a second season with relatively untrained recruits.

Australia

In Australia, SWP workers are employed across a wide variety of seasonal crops and rotations. According to the SWP employers involved in this research, most managed to find their Pacific employees some work in the early months following the border closure, but noted the difficulties in doing so. Not all were able to source work or could only provide reduced hours at best. In some instances, workers with limited hours of work were required to live off savings to cover their living costs and had little money to remit to their families at home. A World Bank study on remittance behaviours among Pacific seasonal workers during the pandemic found that while workers continued to remit, the amounts and frequency decreased (Doan et al. 2020).

A number of employers provided SWP workers new opportunities in jobs not previously offered to SWP workers. Two SWP team leaders interviewed said they took up new positions in their companies, providing them with the opportunity to upskill. For example, a few SWP teams learned how to work with irrigation systems, others with concreting and building, while receiving higher wages than their standard horticultural contracts.

In instances where the employer could not offer the requisite 30 hours' work per week to meet SWP policy requirements, workers were redeployed to new employers who could offer full-time employment.

Between April 2020 and March 2021, there were over 9200 SWP worker redeployments, with some workers redeployed multiple times. As it was a new system for DESE officials as well as employers, there were administrative difficulties, including delays with processing applications, which at times resulted in some SWP workers being out of employment while

waiting to be redeployed. As noted, employers shifting workers across state boundaries faced the added difficulties of adhering to state-controlled COVID-19 border restrictions, which often involved mandatory quarantine, sometimes on both sides of the border. Several informants raised concerns about worker redeployments, including the management of worker wellbeing as they transitioned to a new SWP employer and community, as well as the question of who was to bear the cost of relocation. Those who support SWP workers, such as labour managers, pastoral care hosts and Pacific Country Liaison Officers (CLOs, who are employed by their respective Pacific governments to support worker welfare in-country) were also impacted by border closures and the inability to travel to visit workers who had been redeployed. Notwithstanding these challenges, employers spoke positively of the new, more flexible system of sharing workers.

Financial assistance for temporary migrants

In spite of employers' sustained efforts to keep RSE/SWP workers gainfully employed in the months following the border closures, for many employers finding sufficient work for their employees proved difficult. Temporary migrants in both countries, including RSE/SWP workers, required financial assistance while they remained onshore with no way of returning home. The New Zealand government implemented a financial support package for all temporary migrants, while in Australia a range of support measures were implemented at the state rather than federal level.

New Zealand

On 1 July 2020, the New Zealand government implemented the Foreign Nationals Support Programme — Visitor Care Manaaki Manuhiri. The program, administered by the Department of Internal Affairs in association with the New Zealand Red Cross, provided NZ\$37.6 million in funding to support all classes of temporary visa holders in New Zealand experiencing serious hardship due to COVID-19.²² For eligible applicants, in-kind assistance was provided to cover living costs such as rent, utility bills, food, household goods and basic medical costs.

RSE workers were eligible for support if they were employed for fewer than 30 hours a week and were unable to return home. Unlike other temporary migrants, RSE workers were not required to use up their savings before being eligible for financial assistance. This exception was granted in recognition of the importance of RSE workers' savings and remittances to support their island-based families.

In another departure from other temporary visa holders, RSE workers did not make individual applications for support. Rather, the employer applied on the worker's behalf. This resulted in some delays in uptake of funding for eligible workers, largely due to a lack of understanding of the eligibility requirements among employers. However, by 20 November, 5374 RSE workers who had little or no work had been supported by Visitor Care Manaaki Manuhiri, accounting for 44 per cent of the total number of people (12,321) supported since 1 July.²³

Australia

In Australia, the forms of economic support varied by state and were largely available only to Australian citizens and permanent residents, as well as New Zealand citizens residing in Australia.²⁴ Temporary migrants, including SWP workers, were excluded from national government support such as the JobKeeper and JobSeeker programs (Berg and Farbenblum 2020).^{25, 26} Instead, the primary forms of support for SWP workers came via early access to superannuation entitlements and the Pacific Labour Facility's (PLF) supplementary SWP support program.

SWP workers were able to access up to AU\$10,000 from their superannuation between July and December 2020. No data was available on uptake by SWP workers, but it is unlikely many would have taken this option. SWP workers often have limited knowledge of their superannuation entitlements and rely on labour agents or their employers to assist them in accessing funds when they become eligible. Only one team leader interviewed stated that their employer assisted them to access their superannuation. A World Bank survey (Doan et al. 2020) further supports this. Data from the survey of 273 SWP workers revealed that 42 per cent were unaware of the superannuation entitlement.

A more direct form of support for SWP workers came via the PLF, which oversees the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS).²⁷ The PLF SWP supplementary support program, which was implemented in mid-2020 and ran to December 2020, provided support to DESE officials to address SWP worker welfare issues. This was a new role for PLF; prior to March 2020, the PLF did not engage in welfare support for SWP workers.

An element of this support included financial assistance for SWP workers experiencing hardship. According to PLF's Worker Welfare Lead Manager:

Where any financial-related support needs were identified, the PLF worked with DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] and DESE to explore options of support, including exploration of continued in-kind employer support (e.g. providing accommodation at reduced weekly rates) and/or alternative in-community/diaspora support.

PLF also assisted with redeploying workers, although DESE held overall program responsibility for worker relocations.

The Australian Red Cross (2020) provided financial assistance to 29,000 temporary migrants nationwide between 1 April and 31 July 2020. Support was primarily in the form of one-off emergency relief payments to help eligible temporary migrants cover their living costs, as well as the provision of food parcels. Information on the uptake of this assistance by SWP workers was not available, but was likely limited.²⁸ Berg and Farbenblum (2020) found that only two per cent of the 4133 respondents (none of whom were SWP workers) in their study on temporary migrants stranded in Australia in 2020 accessed the Red Cross assistance package. Temporary migrants were required to make individual applications for support and would have

required a good level of English and computer literacy to navigate the application process. While the website content was translated into a number of languages, none were Pacific languages.

For SWP workers facing financial stress, interviews with SWP team leaders revealed that the bulk of support came from their employers. For example, some employers provided workers with small loans, food and reduced/free weekly rent. Support also came from local diaspora and community groups, including churches. A research participant from the United Church said their members held monthly meetings to discuss what was happening on the ground with SWP workers in their communities and the information was then relayed to DESE officials. However, the capacity of local church and community groups to support SWP workers depended on the needs of the wider community and how much assistance was required by local residents. In some instances, SWP workers pooled their resources to assist one another with living costs. Examples were also given of workers receiving money from family members in the Pacific — an interesting role reversal given that remittances are predominantly sent by SWP workers back to their families to support them.

Part 2. Worker wellbeing

While immigration measures and some forms of financial assistance were key components of the available support for SWP and RSE workers during 2020, both workers and employers continued to face a highly uncertain and complex situation while international borders remained shut. Concerns for worker wellbeing related to the length of the initial lockdowns; COVID-19's prevalence in Australia/New Zealand and how to keep workers safe; the availability of ongoing work; and, for workers, the welfare of their families. Both workers and employers were waiting to learn when repatriation flights would become available to enable workers to return to their home countries. In previous years, seasonal workers experiencing significant personal difficulties or dealing with family emergencies have returned home. However, 2020 was the first year since the RSE (2007) and SWP (2012) schemes were implemented that this self-regulating adjustment to personal and family problems was not possible.

Psychological wellbeing: Coping with absence from family

The initial lockdown periods, which commenced from late March 2020, were especially difficult for Pacific seasonal workers, who were away from the usual safety nets of their families and communities and instead living under restricted conditions with little personal space. While they continued as essential workers, they were unable to undertake other activities such as attending church, playing outside sports or remitting money via store-based money transfer agents. The inability to remit was a significant source of stress, especially for SWP and RSE workers from countries affected by Tropical Cyclone Harold in early April 2020 who wanted to support their families in the aftermath of the cyclone.²⁹ Workers also felt isolated,

not only from their families, but from the usual support structures (particularly, the church) they regularly accessed in their local community in the host country.³⁰

Employers and RSE/SWP team leaders reported that their workers were coping with homesickness and concerns about the wellbeing of family members, as well as missing out on significant family events. These issues were especially difficult for new recruits in their first season in Australia or New Zealand and not used to extended periods of absence from family.

Employers, with the assistance of their pastoral care hosts and RSE/SWP team leaders, implemented a range of measures to support their workers over the lockdown period. Examples included employers ordering and delivering food for workers; establishing small stores onsite at workers' accommodation where workers could shop for food and essential items or designating selected team leaders to visit local supermarkets and shop for their worker groups in order to limit workers' potential exposure to COVID-19; introducing workers to online banking and online money transfer operators so they could continue to remit money to their families; and organising sports tournaments for workers onsite at their accommodation.

Despite these measures, employers and RSE/SWP team leaders spoke of declining rates of worker productivity, mental health issues, increased alcohol consumption and behavioural incidents. In Australia, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was not the first traumatic experience many SWP workers faced in 2020. At the start of the year, widespread bushfires across New South Wales and Victoria resulted in emergency relocations of SWP workers, leading to both disruptions in work and associated challenges for workers suddenly required to move away from their usual places of work and residence to new communities (Bailey 17/1/2020). The bushfires, combined with the impacts of COVID-19 and, for some, the stress caused by the advent of Tropical Cyclone Harold in their home countries, impacted negatively on workers.

Worker behaviour

Under both the SWP and RSE schemes, social sanctions implemented by sending countries work to moderate Pacific seasonal workers' behaviour while in Australia or New Zealand.³¹ A common sanction imposed in the early years of both schemes by sending country governments and enforced by Australian and New Zealand employers was around limiting or prohibiting the consumption of alcohol while workers were undertaking their seasonal work contracts. Workers who repeatedly breached the rules around alcohol consumption could be sent home for serious misconduct.

During 2020, the types of behavioural issues among Pacific seasonal workers reported by employers, CLOs and government respondents were not, for the most part, new. In the annual RSE scheme employer survey (Research New Zealand 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019), for example, problems with excessive alcohol consumption and alcohol-related issues (leading to socially disruptive behaviour) were some of the

more frequently cited character-related issues for employers of Pacific workers (although these tended to be relatively isolated incidents typically affecting only a small number of workers). What made the 2020 year different from previous seasons, however, was that employers could not easily send workers home for any serious misconduct, making it more difficult for employers to manage behavioural issues.³²

Alcohol consumption

Rising rates of alcohol consumption among RSE and SWP workers and associated alcohol-related incidents, including altercations with others, damage to property and drink driving, were the behavioural issues most commonly cited by research participants. Increased alcohol consumption was seen as an indicator of the stress facing workers, especially in cases where there was little or no work available and/or no options to return home. Several employers gave the examples of experienced RSE workers and, in some instances, team leaders who did not consume alcohol in earlier seasons but were found drinking in 2020. These employers cited this change in behaviour as evidence of the rising levels of stress for workers.

When an alcohol-related incident occurred, it tended to be treated as a wellbeing issue by employers and Pacific CLOs rather than an incident requiring disciplinary action, unless connected to a criminal offence. Linked with alcohol consumption, several SWP employers noted that workers had a new disregard for their workplace and accommodation; instances of property damage occurred that were rare pre-COVID-19 as workers vented their frustrations at being unable to return home.³³

In Australia, interviewees from church groups, as well as SWP employers in New South Wales and Queensland, reported that for some SWP workers with limited hours of work, the additional free time led to increased use of gambling machines in local clubs. While workers are not prohibited from gambling, employers, Pacific CLOs and church representatives were concerned about the financial and mental health implications of gambling for Pacific seasonal workers, especially the risk that workers might be losing money needed to cover daily living costs or send as remittances to their island-based families.

Worker disengagement

In Australia, employers and Pacific CLOs reported an increasing incidence of worker disengagement from the SWP, whereby workers abandoned the employment of their authorised SWP employer. In doing so, workers breached their employment contract and the terms of their employer-specific visa that conveys the legal right to remain in Australia. One CLO stated that 148 of their nationals had abandoned their approved employment at the time of interview in November 2020.³⁴

Information provided by DESE indicated that there were around 1000 SWP workers reported by their employers as having disengaged from the program over the period 20 March 2020 to 31 May 2021.³⁵

Lack of full-time work and limited financial support

to help workers cover their living costs were cited as reasons SWP workers breached the conditions of their employment and sought alternative work elsewhere. Other factors identified by SWP workers and employers included:

- worker dissatisfaction with the conditions of their employment, including the restrictive nature of the SWP visa that ties workers to a single employer and, in some instances, means workers are living in isolated areas with few options to engage with others outside of work;
- labour contractors and non-SWP employers offering the prospect of more hours of work, higher wage rates and/or better living conditions elsewhere. In some cases, workers who left their approved SWP employment switched to new employment that turned out to be of no greater financial benefit than their original contracts;
- the change in visa conditions, with SWP workers switching from the employer-specific 403 visa to an interim bridging visa and then the Temporary Activity (subclass 408) visa. Some workers and employers incorrectly assumed that the 408 visa was not employer-specific and workers could therefore find alternative employment;
- encouragement from members of the diaspora to move elsewhere to live with extended family who could provide accommodation, financial support and assistance finding alternative employment;³⁶
- encouragement from SWP workers who had already disengaged from the SWP to apply onshore for asylum, which grants workers a bridging visa with full rights to work for any employer until such time as a decision is made on the asylum application, possibly in three or more years (Howes 4/2/2022); and
- lack of enforcement measures by the Department of Home Affairs to locate and remove those no longer lawfully in Australia.

Four SWP workers who had disengaged from the program were interviewed in this research. Two said they did not plan to undertake future seasonal work in Australia and wanted to travel and experience the country before returning home.

Employers and government stakeholders noted that the welfare of SWP workers who disengage from the program is a significant concern. They stated that by abandoning their approved employment, workers remove themselves from the safeguards of the SWP, including the pastoral care support employers are obligated to provide and the medical care provided under their compulsory medical insurance (which is invalidated if workers breach their visa conditions and no longer have a legal entitlement to remain onshore). Workers do not always understand that by leaving their SWP employment they lose these support measures. In an effort to reduce rates of worker disengagement, in January 2021 the PLF conducted a Facebook campaign to strongly discourage workers from leaving their approved employment. However, late in 2021 the campaign was withdrawn due to public complaints over the messaging to Pacific workers.³⁷

In contrast, New Zealand had few reported incidents of workers disengaging from the RSE scheme during 2020. This can likely be attributed to, in part, the provision of financial assistance to RSE workers with little or no work via Visitor Care Manaaki Manuhiri, which ensured workers' living costs were covered, negating the need to look for alternative employment. Moreover, New Zealand has no comparable system of applying for asylum and being granted a bridging visa with full work rights while waiting several years for a decision — an attractive prospect in Australia (see Howes 4/2/2022).

For the small numbers (<30) of RSE workers who left their RSE jobs in 2020 and went to live with family in the main urban centres — breaching the conditions of the RSE Limited Visa — their disengagement was treated primarily as a wellbeing issue rather than from an immigration compliance perspective. Officials recognised that RSE workers were coping with exceptional circumstances during the pandemic. As one informant stated:

If MBIE [Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment] is to be the guardian of workers' welfare while in New Zealand, there needs to be some flexibility to treat these sorts of situations as a health and wellbeing issue.

Sexual health and pregnancies

For many workers who remained in Australia and New Zealand over the first 12–18 months of the pandemic — much longer than their usual seven-to nine-month contracts — interacting with others beyond the immediate RSE/SWP work group became increasingly important. In some instances, these interactions resulted in unintended consequences, such as sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies and births. Separated by distance and time, the lack of intimacy and contact with partners at home proved an additional burden on workers.

Childbirth away from home was one of the most complex wellbeing issues employers and government agencies had to manage. In previous years, if an RSE/SWP woman discovered she was pregnant, she would be supported to return home to give birth. In 2020, travel restrictions meant there were very few or, in some instances, no opportunities for pregnant women to be repatriated.

Between March 2020 and February 2021, there were 17 reported RSE pregnancies in New Zealand.³⁸ Of those, seven women were able to return home. Ten of the women remained in the country as of February 2021.

In Australia, data provided by the PLF for a four-month period May to September 2020 showed 42 SWP pregnancies were reported. Of those, 14 pregnant women were repatriated and six women gave birth in Australia during the four months. With 22 women still pregnant, additional births, as well as further pregnancies, will have occurred in Australia since the data was provided in September 2020.

There is no publicly funded health care for pregnant SWP/RSE women in either country. Workers are

required to hold compulsory medical insurance, but this does not include cover for pregnancies or birth-related expenses.³⁹ Private maternity care is unlikely to be an option due to the high costs involved, so pregnant women have been reliant on their employers, in the first instance, to help them access support services. Pregnancy and birth costs, estimated to be around AU\$7,000 in Australia and starting at NZ\$9,000 in New Zealand, fall directly on the worker, meaning there is a risk of workers incurring large personal debts.

In Australia, the PLF negotiated with health insurers to provide medical cover for pregnant SWP women due to the unforeseen circumstances that meant women could not return home. In New Zealand, financial assistance with birth costs was provided via Visitor Care Manaaki Manuhiri when it was operational (July to November 2020). From December 2020 onwards, non-government organisations (particularly, pro-life groups) primarily assisted RSE women with birth costs, and employers arranged paid maternity leave via government assistance.⁴⁰ Members of the resident diaspora community also played a critical role housing new mothers and providing food, clothing, financial support and ongoing care for mothers and babies.

More generally, Pacific families, youth groups, non-government organisations and churches all played a major role in supporting seasonal workers from their islands during 2020 and early 2021. This support tends to lack visibility, but it has been substantial and multifaceted in ensuring the collective wellbeing of kin stranded in Australia and New Zealand. When asked about diaspora support, RSE scheme employers were appreciative of the contributions members of resident Pacific communities were making to the collective wellbeing of their workers.⁴¹

Additional wellbeing support measures

Alongside the efforts made by employers, pastoral care hosts, CLOs and others involved in the support of Pacific seasonal workers during 2020, agencies overseeing the seasonal work schemes implemented additional support measures.

Australia

In Australia, the PLF, via the SWP supplementary support program (operational June to December 2020), assisted with more than 700 SWP wellbeing cases, including critical incidents, pregnancies, worker redeployments, worker disengagement and repatriations, as well as linking SWP workers to community support such as local churches and health services.⁴²

As part of PLF's support, SWP employers and workers were able to access PLF's 24-hour worker welfare telephone hotline to raise concerns and report incidents.⁴³ PLF also ran a major communications campaign during 2020 to get key messages to Pacific workers on health and safety during COVID-19, employment and wellbeing support.⁴⁴

Employers interviewed said they were grateful for the additional support and found PLF's welfare team responsive to issues that were raised. The utility of the hotline as a culturally appropriate tool Pacific workers would actually use to report concerns was questioned

by Pacific CLOs and community respondents. However, they did not have other viable suggestions, apart from drawing on local diaspora for support.

DESE traditionally played a limited role in SWP worker welfare, instead focusing largely on compliance and monitoring of employers' welfare responsibilities. As part of the SWP supplementary support program, PLF's welfare team acted in a capacity-building role for DESE regional staff and facilitated the development of a new regional approach to worker welfare.

In October 2020, DESE secured AU\$9 million in funding under a new package for SWP worker wellbeing. Funding was allocated to appoint 19 regional Pacific Labour Mobility officers to provide employers some assistance.⁴⁵ The package also included funding for the development of a Community Connections initiative to be delivered by the Salvation Army, which operates nationwide. The Salvation Army, working with partners including the Pacific Islands Council of South Australia and the Uniting Church, were awarded AU\$1 million over a two-year period to 'provide additional and strengthened welfare support to workers, better connect them with their local communities and work to advance cultural understanding with the wider population' (Cash 2021).

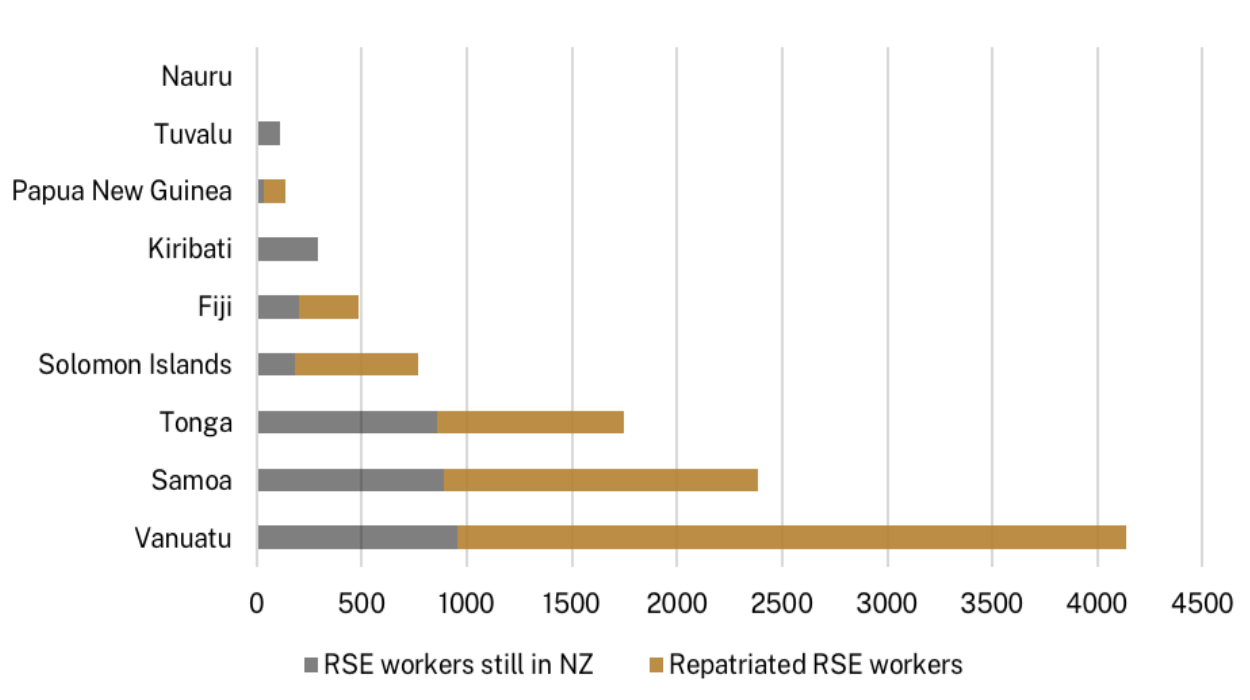
New Zealand

In New Zealand, MBIE introduced several support measures to assist RSE workers caught by COVID-19 travel restrictions. A social media campaign was implemented in 2020 to disseminate key messages to RSE workers on COVID-19 health and safety requirements, RSE visa extensions and entitlements and worker repatriations. MBIE initiated a Regional Presence Programme that involved visits by New Zealand-based Pacific officials and CLOs to RSE workers located around the country to boost workers' morale. Local police and other key community contacts also participated in the meetings to advise workers on accessing local support services.

Late in 2020, MBIE implemented a mental health initiative. Run by Vaka Tautua, a Pacific health and social services provider, the program offered online counselling services to RSE workers. Regular webinars were also held by MBIE staff, bringing together RSE team leaders, CLOs and RSE relationship managers (employed by MBIE to support RSE scheme employers) to discuss worker wellbeing issues.

There were also opportunities for RSE workers on reduced work hours to access additional training through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT)-funded Vakameasina program, which delivers RSE workers training.⁴⁶ Training in 2020 focused primarily on workers' wellbeing and included practical courses (for example, carpentry, engine maintenance, solar power, potable water) as well as fitness classes, arts and crafts and training in sending money home via online methods. Driver training (NZ Road Code theory test) was another popular course. Vakameasina tutors undertook a Red Cross Psychological First Aid course to ensure they were somewhat equipped to support workers who approached them with personal issues during training.

Figure 2. Current status of RSE workers in New Zealand since March 2020 as of 1 August 2021



Source: Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, unpublished data 1 August 2021.

Worker repatriations

Repatriation programs to facilitate the return of RSE and SWP workers to their home countries was another key part of the response to support workers during 2020–21. This proved to be a highly complex task while Pacific borders remained largely closed and few commercial flights were available.

New Zealand

In New Zealand, MFAT led the RSE repatriation efforts in close collaboration with employers, industry groups and Pacific governments. The first repatriation flights began in June 2020 with the repatriation of over 1000 ni-Vanuatu workers by the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) in what was the largest peace-time movement of personnel by the NZDF since the Second World War. The cost of the operation was borne by the New Zealand government as a ‘thank you ... for all the hard work that the ni-Vanuatu RSE workers have done in New Zealand over more than a decade’ (Massing 26/6/2020). RSE worker returns were prioritised based on need, with first priority given to those with an urgent or compassionate reason to return to the Pacific (such as family issues, bereavement or serious health concerns). RSE workers without employment and with no ongoing work readily available were the second priority, followed by those with limited work (Bedford 10/7/2020).

By early August 2021, 65 per cent (6551) of the 10,078 Pacific RSE workers who were in New Zealand in March 2020 had been repatriated (Figure 2). Over 75 per cent of RSE workers from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea had returned home by August. More than 60 per cent of Samoan RSE workers had also been repatriated, along with over 50 per cent of workers from Tonga and Fiji. For all workers, aside from the 1000 ni-Vanuatu returned home by the

NZDF, repatriations were via commercial operators and charter flights. Only three countries — Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru — had no repatriation pathways available during 2020–21. This was partly due to the lack of direct flights between New Zealand and these three central Pacific countries, as well as the difficulties of transiting via other countries, such as Australia and Fiji, due to border restrictions and COVID-19-related quarantine requirements.

Australia

Repatriations of SWP workers occurred as part of a larger initiative called the Pacific Screening Support Program (PSSP) that commenced late in March 2020 to assist with the return of Pacific diaspora. The PSSP provided a number of services such as Passenger Support Officers, who assisted in mobilising travellers to airports as well as provided pre-departure COVID-19 testing. Between 28 March 2020 and 15 May 2021, more than 6400 Pacific island and Timorese nationals were returned to their home countries, including over 1370 SWP workers. Under the PSSP, SWP workers received support with transport, accommodation, meals, travel documentation, COVID-19 testing and airport assistance prior to departure from Australia.⁴⁷ The PSSP was initially extended until 30 June 2021, with a further extension to March 2022.

Respondents cited a range of challenges with SWP repatriations, including short lead times to get SWP workers to international airports for departure and a lack of support for workers preparing to return home. Examples were provided of workers left to organise their own transport from Victoria to Darwin (a distance of approximately 3500 kilometres), with one Pacific CLO revealing they gave instructions to workers via video link to get from a Melbourne train station to an

interstate bus station. Others noted that workers often slept in airports overnight awaiting departure. Several employers felt Pacific sending countries should have provided their Pacific CLOs more resources to assist workers trying to return home.

Several employers, as well as SWP team leaders, interviewed also raised concerns about the process for prioritising the return of workers, arguing that those who wanted to return home for non-medical reasons were prioritised ahead of those with medical conditions. Misinformation about the availability of flights, especially on social media and via some Pacific news outlets, created uncertainty and mistrust among workers, who were unsure their employers or team leaders were giving them accurate information. These tensions were further fuelled by ongoing flight changes and cancellations in light of ever-changing COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Financing the cost of repatriation was also difficult for workers. As a condition of their employment, workers had already paid for their return airfare (minus the employer contribution of AU\$300). However, most flights were cancelled and SWP workers could only obtain a flight credit with an airline that had ceased operations. Initial repatriation flights were offered as discounted one-way airfares. However, for some workers, the cost was still too great, as they had used their savings to cover living costs while not in work. Examples were provided of church groups fundraising to cover airfare costs for workers who could not afford to return home.

During 2021, repatriation efforts from Australia and New Zealand to Pacific countries remained a significant logistical challenge, as many Pacific borders remained predominantly closed. Barriers to repatriation included changing entry and quarantine requirements by Pacific governments (for example, the Samoa and Papua New Guinea governments' requirement, from 1 July 2021, as well as Vanuatu's from 20 August 2021, that all returning nationals have full COVID-19 vaccination for entry); limited managed isolation and quarantine capacity in Pacific countries that catered for all returning nationals, not just returning seasonal workers; a lack of available flights and the associated costs; and limited health infrastructure and resources in many Pacific countries to deal with a COVID-19 outbreak if one occurred.

SWP and RSE workers who had an available repatriation pathway in 2020–21 had to decide whether to return home or stay on for another season and earn money to support their families. This was a difficult decision for many workers as they weighed the trade-off between the social costs of an extended absence from family and the financial gains of ongoing seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand.

Part 3. Re-opening borders and resuming two-way Pacific seasonal labour flows

By August 2021, a combined total of around 8000 Pacific seasonal workers who had entered prior to March 2020 remained in Australia and New Zealand.

For these long-term workers, physical and mental exhaustion was taking its toll. Many had worked almost continuously, some for close to two years, often moving between different employers, crops, tasks and communities. While workers may have taken short breaks from their seasonal jobs (all of the employers interviewed and three SWP employers had arranged short holidays for their workers), these breaks were no substitute for the three-to six-month periods back home returning seasonal workers are accustomed to that provide downtime from their physically demanding seasonal jobs as well as essential time with family.

In November 2021, discussions with RSE industry representatives and some of the largest RSE scheme employers highlighted long-term workers' declining productivity and motivation to work as concerns. The strong incentive usually associated with short-term periods of seasonal work — working hard over several months to earn as much money as possible on piece rates to achieve specific household goals — evaporated for those who had no certainty about when they would be able to return home. Some workers became selective about the types of jobs they would do and under what conditions (for example, refusing to work on rainy days). Employers also reported workers' declining respect for RSE team leaders (who are appointed by the workers) and others in positions of authority, such as orchard supervisors, as the usual cohesiveness of work groups was eroded due to the much longer periods of living and working together in close proximity.

Exhaustion also took its toll on employers and others involved in the daily lives of RSE and SWP workers who had been providing support well beyond the usual seven to nine months of the seasonal work visa. Employers stated that they were dealing with wellbeing issues with which they had no prior experience and for which they were not trained, including psychological issues, criminal offences, terminal medical conditions and worker deaths. Three SWP employers said they had accessed mental health support services for themselves or a staff member responsible for their SWP workforce to help with stress management.

In New Zealand, the strain on employers was evident, with reports of key staff resigning from their jobs in 2021 due to the sustained pressure. For many HR staff who oversee RSE labour in their enterprises, managing RSE arrangements is not their sole job. Rather, maintaining overarching responsibility for the wellbeing of their RSE workforce is one of a series of roles they perform in the day-to-day operations of their enterprise, including trying to secure seasonal labour for peak harvest and pruning periods.

Horticulture industry groups worked hard with MFAT and Pacific governments to secure pathways home for long-term workers, recognising the strong imperative to return workers to their families. Nonetheless, supporting Pacific workers who remained onshore during 2021, including efforts to get them home, was one component of a much bigger picture. In both countries, key stakeholders continued to grapple with significant shortages of seasonal

labour while travel restrictions remained in place and other traditional sources of seasonal labour, such as backpackers and international students, were limited (Bedford 21/2/2022; Hickey 25/2/2022).

Resumption of inward flows of Pacific workers

In recognition of the horticulture industries' essential role to both countries' economies and their need for labour to support production, the Australian and New Zealand governments recommenced the inward flows of Pacific seasonal workers while their borders remained predominantly closed. Australia resumed their Pacific labour schemes (SWP and PLS) in mid-2020, initially with a group of 162 ni-Vanuatu SWP workers recruited under a small pilot program for work picking mangoes in the Northern Territory (Bedford and Bailey 21/8/2020). Between 1 August 2020 and 30 June 2021, over 6200 SWP visa approvals were granted, with Vanuatu (44 per cent) accounting for the largest share of approvals, followed by Tonga (31.5 per cent) and Samoa (11 per cent).⁴⁸ By 30 June 2021, SWP visa approvals had been granted to citizens of all 10 participating countries except Nauru and Tuvalu.

In August 2021, the then Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, announced plans to expand the number of Pacific and Timorese workers in Australia under the SWP and PLS to at least 25,000 by March 2022 (Payne and Seselja 2021). This doubling commitment (from around 12,000 pre-COVID-19) required a significant scale up of operations in Australia and participating Pacific labour sending units (which oversee administration of the Australian and New Zealand schemes from the Pacific end) to mobilise enough SWP and PLS workers to meet the then prime minister's target. By April 2022, this target had almost been reached, with an estimated 23,000 workers in Australia under both programs (Sharman and Howes 6/5/2022).

In New Zealand, inward flows of Pacific RSE labour resumed in 2021 but on a much smaller scale. The New Zealand government granted two border exceptions for the re-entry of groups of RSE workers late in 2020 and early 2021, with a total of 2458 RSE workers arriving between January and August 2021 (see Bedford 28/1/2021, 15/6/2021 for a discussion of these arrangements). However, only a small number of Pacific countries participated in the border exceptions, with Vanuatu accounting for 66 per cent of the 2458 arrivals and a further 31.5 per cent from Samoa. The RSE border exceptions were subsequently replaced by a one-way quarantine-free travel arrangement with Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu that commenced in October 2021 (O'Connor 2021).⁴⁹

By late May 2022, over 8000 workers from the three quarantine-free travel countries had arrived in New Zealand for the peak apple and kiwifruit harvests and start of winter vineyard pruning. When combined with the approximately 2300 long-term RSE workers still in the country, as well as the 1600 workers who had arrived under the 2021 border exceptions and remained onshore, there was a total RSE labour force of more than 12,000 workers, around 75 per cent of the annual RSE cap of 16,000 for the 2021/22 season.

With low regional unemployment rates — which meant few suitable locals were available for seasonal work — and limited numbers of backpackers onshore, ensuring RSE workers were employed at the right time in the regions experiencing seasonal peaks and high labour demands was a priority for employers and industry groups. Alongside sustained efforts to share RSE workers between employers, crops and regions, government and industry persevered with repatriation efforts for long-term workers. By late July 2022 — more than two years since the onset of the pandemic — all participating RSE countries had finally established a repatriation pathway for their RSE workers to return home.

Re-thinking immigration policy settings: Implications for the Pacific

Recommencing inward flows of Pacific seasonal labour was one element of a much broader approach being taken by the Australia and New Zealand governments to reassess their respective immigration policy settings — designed to support long-term economic growth — ahead of borders re-opening.

As part of New Zealand's staged process of re-opening their international border by mid-2022, the government commenced a 'rebalance' of the immigration system to support a 'higher-productivity, higher-wage economy' (Immigration New Zealand 2022c; Office of the Minister of Immigration 2021). Part of the rebalance includes considering ways to reduce the economy's reliance on 'lower skilled' workers in certain sectors (ibid). While the RSE scheme has not been immediately impacted by the government's review, in future, the primary industries, including horticulture, will likely face growing pressure to reduce dependence on migrant seasonal labour. Instead, growers will be encouraged to invest more in labour-saving technologies both on the orchard and in the packhouse, as well as continue investing in recruiting, retaining and upskilling New Zealanders (Wilson and Fry 2021).

In Australia, 2021 and early 2022 saw the role of Pacific labour mobility increasingly politicised (Sharman and Howes 19/5/2022). Contributing factors included the critical part Pacific labour played in Australia's agricultural production during the pandemic (when other migrant labour was unavailable) and labour mobility's heightened role in Australia's foreign policy in the Pacific region (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2022).

In late November 2021, the former Morrison government announced that Australia's two Pacific labour mobility schemes — the SWP and the PLS — would be aligned into a single program and rebranded the Pacific Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. Formally established in April 2022, the consolidated program streamlines a range of SWP and PLS administrative processes and brings them under a single Employer Deed of Agreement and set of employer guidelines that outlines program arrangements and employers' obligations. A single PALM scheme visa stream has been introduced, enabling employers to recruit workers

for either short-term seasonal roles or long-term permanent positions. PALM–PLS visa validity has been extended to a maximum of four years and employers can nominate workers employed in short-term seasonal roles to transition onshore onto the longer-term four-year visa (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2022).

As part of the alignment, the management of the SWP — formerly with DESE — moved under the remit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which retains oversight of the PLS with support from the department’s contract provider, the PLF. In practice, the day-to-day management of the SWP, including program-level oversight of worker welfare and support, now falls under the PLF (SWP employers still retain primary responsibility for worker wellbeing). Under the PALM scheme, the Community Connections program delivered by the Salvation Army is set to continue, and there is a strong emphasis on building engagement between employers and community groups to support SWP and PLS workers. The PLF has also established a domestic regional presence and infrastructure for PALM via the Australian Engagement Stream, the purpose of which is to support employer engagement and build employer capacity and compliance, especially around worker wellbeing obligations.

With the election of the Labor government in May 2022, further reforms to the PALM scheme are scheduled for 2022 and 2023, including extending the validity of the PALM–SWP visa from nine to 11 months’ seasonal work each year. The Labor government has also introduced family accompaniment under the longer-term PALM–PLS stream, allowing workers on the four-year visa to bring partners and children to Australia. This represents a significant shift in Australia’s Pacific labour mobility programs and is designed to boost further participation in the PALM–PLS and address earlier concerns regarding family separation under the multi-year PLS program (see, for instance, Hill et al. 2018; Howes 23/2/2018).

During 2022, both countries’ seasonal work schemes have also come under enhanced parliamentary scrutiny, with particular reference to employment conditions and worker welfare. In New Zealand, wages and employment conditions under the RSE scheme were reviewed as part of a parliamentary select committee inquiry into the Fair Pay Agreements Bill, which is before parliament in 2022–23.^{50, 51}

The Australian Senate Select Committee on Job Security held two hearings into the SWP (2 February and 10 March 2022) as part of a wider review into the ‘impact of insecure or precarious employment on the economy, wages, social cohesion and workplace rights and conditions’ (Parliament of Australia 2022a, 2022b). The Senate hearings dealt with allegations of worker exploitation, particularly concerns around worker accommodation and excessive wage deductions. The Senate inquiry recommended further tightening of worker protections. Changes announced following the inquiry included greater assurance and compliance activities by relevant government agencies to monitor employers and greater union involvement to support and collectively bargain for workers (Sharman and

Howes 1/4/2022).

The Australian Senate inquiry findings have also contributed to more critical reflection on the benefits and costs of engagement in offshore labour mobility by some Pacific countries, including Samoa and Vanuatu — two of the largest suppliers of seasonal labour to Australia and New Zealand. Both countries are reviewing their participation in the Australian and New Zealand schemes, with an emphasis on ensuring there are adequate safeguards in place to protect the welfare of their nationals while employed offshore in seasonal jobs. This critical reflection by two of the largest sending countries bodes well for a stronger Pacific voice in the seasonal work schemes in future. Pacific states are beginning to consider what arrangements are best for them and what work and living conditions they are prepared to accept for their nationals rather than focusing primarily on responding to Australia and New Zealand’s demands for labour.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be seen, in retrospect, as a significant turning point in the evolution of the Australian and New Zealand seasonal work schemes. One of the major positives of the sustained border closures in 2020–21 has been the strengthening of the employer–worker relationships at the heart of the seasonal worker arrangements. Employers have worked collaboratively with their Pacific employees to adapt and respond to the challenges presented by an ever-changing COVID-19 environment.

Linked to this, employers and workers’ experiences during the first two years of the pandemic have brought into sharper focus the need for a more holistic approach to supporting worker wellbeing — one that recognises the deep connections and responsibilities Pacific seasonal workers have to their social units in their home countries. In New Zealand, MBIE officials, who oversee the RSE scheme’s operation, have adopted a new approach to worker welfare that draws on Pacific perspectives, incorporating familial, spiritual, cultural, physical and psychological aspects of wellbeing.⁵² Alongside access to regular seasonal work and the associated income, these dimensions of wellbeing are integral to Pacific seasonal workers’ sense of stability, security and belonging while away from home.

Stronger connections have developed between government agencies, industry groups and community stakeholders, including members of resident Pacific communities (the diaspora), who have collectively dealt with the complex wellbeing issues that have emerged for workers coping with extended absences from family. New stakeholders, such as the Salvation Army in Australia, and the New Zealand Red Cross, have also become involved. These humanitarian agencies traditionally have not played a role in the SWP and RSE schemes, but have expressed interest in ongoing engagement, particularly around worker wellbeing.⁵³

Members of Pacific diaspora groups have played a much greater role in the support of Pacific seasonal workers during 2020–21 than in earlier years of the schemes. Associated with this, there has been

growing recognition by employers, as well as agencies with oversight of the RSE and SWP, of the value of community engagement. In Australia, this has been formalised by the SWP Community Connections initiative delivered by the Salvation Army, as well as the PLF's 'community of care' approach to worker wellbeing, which aims to ensure PLS (and now PALM-SWP and PALM-PLS) workers, and their employers, have access to relevant civic and community welfare support services (for instance, church and diaspora organisations).

The 2022 parliamentary inquiries into aspects of the SWP and RSE schemes have further heightened the focus on worker wellbeing, especially in relation to employment conditions. Associated with this, Pacific countries' own critical reflections on their engagement in the seasonal work schemes are likely to place added pressure on employers, industry groups and the agencies administering the seasonal work schemes to ensure appropriate worker welfare safeguards are in place. Monitoring workers' experiences in Australia and New Zealand is likely to become a central element of the schemes' future operation.

Australia's policies towards Pacific migration have shifted significantly in 2021-22 and will ultimately change the shape of temporary offshore employment opportunities for Pacific individuals and their families.

While New Zealand's 2022 immigration policy review does not directly relate to the RSE scheme, it would be unwise to ignore the changing rhetoric and possible impacts it may have on the RSE scheme's growth trajectory in future.

As both seasonal work schemes continue to evolve in the post-COVID-19 restrictions era, stakeholders in Australia, New Zealand and participating Pacific countries will need to work collectively to ensure the schemes continue to meet their original aims of supporting industry productivity and growth while also contributing to the economic and social wellbeing of Pacific seasonal workers, their families and communities.

Acknowledgements

Over 100 informants participated in this research from a wide range of stakeholder groups, including seasonal workers, employers, industry representatives, community organisations and officials from Pacific, Australian and New Zealand government agencies. The willingness of informants to engage with us and assist with our research is greatly appreciated. Special thanks to all participants for giving us their time and sharing their stories.

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Author notes

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Endnotes

1. A useful review of global-level responses to the pandemic during 2020 can be found in Benton et al. (2021), while a summary of changes in entry regulations into countries in the Pacific region is available in Burson et al. (2021). The International Organization for Migration has published a series of research papers on COVID-19 and its role in the transformation of migration and mobility. See, for instance, Capal (2020); Foley and Piper (2020); Freier (2020); Guadagno (2020) and Yeoh (2020). Examples of other relevant publications on the impacts of the pandemic on migrant workers include Subramaniam et al. (2021); FAO (2020); ILO (2020); Moroz et al. (2020) and Doan et al. (2020).
2. Eligible Pacific countries are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Timor-Leste is also eligible for the SWP. In New Zealand, seasonal jobs are restricted to the horticulture and viticulture sectors. In Australia, SWP workers can be employed in agriculture (including cane, cotton and pastoral work), horticulture, aquaculture and seasonal jobs in the accommodation sector in selected locations. The majority of workers are employed in horticulture.
3. In the most recent annual RSE scheme employer survey, conducted in 2019, the key benefits of participating in the scheme identified by employers (n=102) were a more stable workforce (100 per cent) and a higher quality and more productive workforce (99 per cent) (Research New Zealand 2019). Individual case studies of worker productivity confirm that RSE workers have higher productivity rates, measured by payment on piece rates, than local New Zealand seasonal workers and other sources of temporary labour (Fry and Wilson 2022; Gibson and McKenzie 2014).
4. For a review of governance arrangements under the SWP, see Curtain and Howes (2020). For a discussion of RSE policy settings, see Ramasamy et al. (2008).
5. The welfare obligations of SWP employers are outlined in the SWP Deed of Agreement and Approved Employer Guidelines. For employers, their welfare obligations are detailed in the Immigration New Zealand Operational Manual (Immigration New Zealand 2022a).
6. On 20 March 2020, 10,989 RSE workers were onshore. Of those, 92 per cent (10,073) were from

- participating Pacific countries, with the remaining 916 workers from countries in South-East Asia. Around 1500 RSE workers are recruited each year from six countries in South-East Asia, mainly Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The participation of Asian countries in the RSE scheme is residual from an earlier seasonal work policy that was grandparented into the RSE policy.
7. In Australia, 7012 SWP workers were in the country as of 31 March 2020, including 1215 workers from Timor-Leste. Department of Home Affairs unpublished data, October 2021.
 8. RSE workers from Kiribati and Tuvalu can be employed for up to nine months in any 11-month period in recognition of the relative isolation of their countries and high travel costs to New Zealand.
 9. See Curtain et al. (2018) for a review of the conditions under which the Australian and New Zealand seasonal work schemes operate.
 10. RSE/SWP workers form a significant component of the seasonal labour force in both countries' horticulture industries, employed alongside local workers and other temporary migrant workers (e.g. backpackers and international students). During 2020 and 2021, when the Australian and New Zealand horticulture sectors faced significant labour shortages, due in large part to COVID-related border closures, both governments implemented measures to support the inward flows of Pacific seasonal labour. In Australia, a 'restart' to their Pacific labour schemes commenced in August 2020 (Lawton 27/5/2021; Littleproud et al. 2020). The New Zealand government implemented their first border exception in January 2021 (O'Connor and Faafoi 2020), enabling workers from select Pacific countries to enter for seasonal employment. In both cases, the decisions were made by government following strong lobbying from industry groups for Pacific labour to help meet their seasonal labour needs and recognising the crucial role these workers play in supporting both countries' horticulture sectors.
 11. For information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on scheduled domestic and international flight capacity, see Official Aviation Guide (2022), which shows weekly flight travel data from 2019 to the present day, tracking both the impact of COVID-19 and the more recent recovery of the travel industry.
 12. The Temporary Activity (subclass 408) COVID-19 pandemic event visa grants a stay of up to 12 months for persons employed in critical sectors of agriculture, food processing, health care, aged care, disability care, child care, tourism and hospitality (Department of Home Affairs 2022a). Prior to the visa's expiry, eligible applicants can apply for another 408 visa onshore.
 13. The Australian Government's intention was for workers to remain under the same employment conditions as the employer-specific 403 visa, and this was stipulated in the 408 visa conditions (Department of Home Affairs 2022c). Nevertheless, the change in visa caused some confusion for SWP employers and workers, especially with regards to whether or not SWP workers were still obligated to remain with their original employer or eligible to work for a different employer on the 408 visa. This confusion contributed to a number of workers leaving their approved employment, thus breaching their visa conditions (see section on worker disengagement).
 14. Employers wishing to share workers on joint ATRs must submit a joint application to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment specifying the number of workers and periods of work on both ATRs. RSE workers enter into individual employment contracts with each employer. Costs of recruitment and transport of RSE workers to and from New Zealand are generally shared by the employers, and each employer is responsible for the workers' pastoral care during the contracted period.
 15. In January 2020, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment introduced the SWP worker portability pilot, which enabled employers operating in parts of Victoria and New South Wales to share workers under a multi-sponsor arrangement (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2020). Prior to the closure of Australia's border on 20 March 2020, there was no uptake of the pilot (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2021).
 16. DESE also updated the SWP Deed of Agreement (the binding obligations under which an enterprise must operate to be granted Approved Employer status) on two occasions to account for specific conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as worker quarantine requirements.
 17. State and territory border closures were made as early as 19 March 2020. They were made for, in order, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. Later announcements for other states were also made in response to COVID-19 cases. For a detailed chronology of state and territory government announcements relating to COVID-19 cases, border restrictions and economic support packages (up to 30 June 2020) see Storen and Corrigan (2020).
 18. For a review of New Zealand's horticultural exports in 2020, see Horticulture New Zealand (2020).
 19. The data relating to numbers of RSE workers in New Zealand in 2020 and 2021 come from unpublished sources maintained by Immigration New Zealand in the Ministry of Business,

- Innovation and Employment. We acknowledge the assistance provided by Michael Jones in accessing this information.
20. The distribution of RSE workers across accredited employers is highly uneven. During the last full year of recruitment (2018/19), there were 147 employers and 12,581 seasonal workers. The 10 largest employers (all with 300 or more RSE workers each) accounted for 45 per cent of the total arrivals during the year. Two-thirds (the majority) of the 147 employers had fewer than 50 RSE workers, and 40 per cent had fewer than 20 RSE workers each. Further information on the composition of the employers and their workforces can be found in Bedford (2020).
 21. In recognition of the oversupply of RSE labour through the winter months and the difficulties facing employers trying to provide sufficient work, late in June 2020 Immigration New Zealand introduced further changes to provide employers greater flexibility to keep workers in employment. A Special Direction visa, valid until 30 October 2020, was announced that would allow RSE workers who were no longer employed on a valid ATR to undertake employment in any industry, doing any role, while awaiting repatriation. The employers had to guarantee a minimum of 15 hours' work a week and continue to meet their pastoral care obligations. Despite the greater flexibility, uptake of the Special Direction visa by employers was very limited. The majority of employers still had valid ATRs (which had been extended in line with the blanket RSE visa extension to 25 September 2020) and, even if they were struggling to find work to meet the RSE policy requirement of 30 hours a week, they were not allowed to cancel a valid ATR and switch workers onto the Special Direction visa.
 22. For information on the Foreign Nationals Support Programme – Visitor Care Manaaki Manuhiri, see Department of Internal Affairs (2020).
 23. Unpublished data from the Foreign Nationals Support Programme – Visitor Care Manaaki Manuhiri Dashboard 21, Friday 20 November 2020 (Burson et al. 2021).
 24. For announcements of broad economic packages by state and territory governments between March and June 2020, see Storen and Corrigan (2020).
 25. JobKeeper payments were to support businesses affected by the pandemic. It was a wage subsidy to cover the costs of wages to employees. Beginning 30 March 2020 and ending 28 March 2021 (Australian Tax Office 2022).
 26. JobSeeker replaced the Newstart allowance program in March 2020. It provides financial help for unemployed and those looking for work between the ages of 22 and pension age (Services Australia 2022).
 27. Established in 2018, the PLS allows people from Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste to work in low and semi-skilled jobs in rural and regional Australia for up to three years.
 28. The authors requested information from the Australian Red Cross on whether eligible SWP workers applied for financial assistance. Due to time constraints, the Red Cross was unable to supply data prior to publication of this paper.
 29. Tropical Cyclone Harold was the first tropical cyclone in 2020 and caused widespread destruction in northern Vanuatu and affected Fiji, Tonga and Solomon Islands.
 30. The church plays a central role in the lives of many Pacific people. Over 70 per cent of New Zealand's total Pacific population (381,642) reported at least one church affiliation at the time of the 2018 Census (Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa 2018).
 31. In the early years of the RSE scheme, both Samoa and Vanuatu imposed penalties on workers who were sent home following a breach of their RSE employment contract and/or for serious misbehaviour (for example, criminal activity) while in New Zealand. Penalties could involve workers being subject to a monetary fine or being stood down for a set period from redeployment as an RSE worker. In serious cases, workers' families or entire village could be banned from participation for a set period (see, for example, Bailey 2014; Bedford 2013).
 32. The government agencies overseeing SWP (DESE) and RSE (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment) both provided data on worker incidents in 2020. However, in both cases, changes to the reporting format for worker incidents meant the 2020 data could not be reviewed alongside incident data from earlier years for comparison.
 33. Team leader 14/10/2020. Study informant, personal communication.
 34. Country Liaison Officer 6/11/ 2020. Study informant, personal communication.
 35. Incidents reported in SWPOnline, DESE's online incident register. DESE 8/07/2020, personal communication.
 36. Two employers who were interviewed acknowledged the value of extended family in Australia. These employers allowed their workers who were without paid work to temporarily reside with family based elsewhere in Australia. Kinship, reciprocity and support are highly valued in the Pacific, and diaspora support is a key component of Pacific livelihoods overseas.
 37. The campaign was criticised for failing to recognise the multiple and complex factors that can

- contribute to a worker's decision to 'abscond' from their employment (Stead 10/11/2021).
38. Unpublished data provided by MBIE.
 39. In New Zealand, medical insurance cover to 24 weeks is only available in the case of pregnancy complications. In Australia, there is a 12-month stand down period before workers are eligible for pregnancy-related cover. With a maximum of nine months on an SWP visa, pregnant SWP women do not qualify for assistance under normal employment circumstances.
 40. New Zealand's Inland Revenue department, which manages tax collection, administers paid parental leave entitlements (Inland Revenue 2022).
 41. Interaction between RSE workers and Pacific diaspora communities was not encouraged by employers during the early years of the scheme because of fears workers might be encouraged to breach their visa conditions (for example, by seeking employment elsewhere and overstaying their visas). Workers leaving their approved employment and overstaying RSE visas has not, however, been a problem over the 15 years of the scheme's operation. During the pandemic, there has been much wider acceptance by employers of the benefits of workers interacting with, and being supported by, diaspora communities.
 42. PLF mid-year briefing January 2021. Unpublished report.
 43. Between June and November 2020, the PLF recorded 45 cases in the SWP Communications Log related to COVID-19. Cases included 'concerns around adherence to COVID-19 safety requirements in the workplace, visa/repatriation options, reduced working hours and feelings of isolation and loneliness' (PLF 2020:9).
 44. Communications included social media posts, video messages, flyers translated into multiple Pacific languages and Facebook live bible studies sessions (PLF 2020).
 45. Curtin (29/1/2021) noted, however, that the Pacific Labour Mobility officer role is primarily one of compliance and monitoring welfare and accommodation standards rather than problem solving and resolving issues for SWP employers.
 46. For information on Vakameasina's role and training programs, see Vakameasina (2022).
 47. PSSP report, 28 March 2020 – 15 May 2021. Unpublished data, Pacific Labour Facility.
 48. Unpublished data, Department of Home Affairs June 2021.
 49. In early November, there was also a border exception flight from Solomon Islands that brought in 148 RSE workers. As this was under the border exception arrangements, the workers were subject to government-run managed isolation and quarantine, with the costs borne by employers. This was the only border exception flight from Solomon Islands.
 50. The Fair Pay Agreements Bill would provide a collective bargaining framework for fair pay agreements across entire industries or occupations rather than just between unions and particular employers (New Zealand Parliament 2022). The Bill was introduced to parliament in March 2022. See, for instance, Horticulture New Zealand's (2022) submission on the Fair Pay Agreements Bill in the context of the RSE scheme.
 51. In New Zealand and Australia, changes to minimum wage requirements for seasonal workers were implemented in 2021 and 2022. Revisions were made to the RSE policy in 2021 requiring all employers to pay their workers a guaranteed 30 hours' work per week at the living wage of NZ\$22.10 per hour, which is higher than the national minimum wage (NZ\$20.00 from 1 April 2021; NZ\$21.20 from 1 April 2022). The living wage rate is set to increase to \$23.65 per hour on 1 September 2022. In Australia, adjustments were made to the Horticultural Award, effective from 28 April 2022, which now guarantees a minimum hourly wage for pieceworkers. Employers are required to fix the piece rate at an amount so that a worker with 'the average productivity of a competent pieceworker' will earn at least 15 per cent more per hour than the minimum hourly wage (Fair Work Ombudsman 2022).
 52. MBIE officials are now drawing on the Fonofale model of health and wellbeing, which acknowledges Pacific perspectives, to better address workers' needs (Springboard Trust 2022). Developed by Samoan-born academic Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann, it was created as a Pacific model of health encompassing Polynesian values and beliefs. The fale, or house, represents a person's overall wellbeing and is comprised of multiple individual elements. The floor, or foundation, represents your family, immediate and extended, and others you are linked to in partnership or agreement. The roof is your culture, beliefs and value system, which provide protection and shelter. These two parts of the fale are then supported — figuratively and literally — by four pillars. They represent the spiritual, physical, mental and 'other' aspects of wellbeing (for example, gender and socio-economic status). No one part of the fale stands in isolation — they are all reliant on and supportive of one another. Building on this model, in June 2021, MBIE officials ran a three-day *talanoa* (sharing of ideas and discussion) with RSE stakeholders in New Zealand to better understand worker wellbeing issues and

how best to address them.

53.NZ Red Cross employee 15/07/ 2021. Informal discussion, personal communication. Australian Red Cross staff 12/12/ 2021. Study informant, personal communication.

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