



Border closures and grounded international travel - implications for Pacific seasonal workers

By Rochelle Bailey and Charlotte Bedford

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On 19 March 2020, the prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand both took the unprecedented move of closing the two countries' respective borders in their attempts to limit the spread of COVID-19. At the time of their decisions, over 16,000 Pacific seasonal workers were working on their farms - [7,000 in Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme \(SWP\)](#) and more than 9,700 in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program.

With thousands of Pacific workers involved in Australia's and New Zealand's seasonal worker programs, what are the implications of the COVID-19 border closures and travel bans in both sending and receiving countries? The New Zealand border is initially closed for 16 days after which time the closure will be reviewed and possibly extended. The Australian closure is in place until further notice. Pacific seasonal workers with contracts that are due to finish in the next few weeks face significant uncertainty over the availability of further work and how they will cover their living costs if there are no flights to their home country or restrictions on them returning home. Two areas of particular concern relate to workers' finances and their health during the current situation.

Workers' finances

Discussions with several ni-Vanuatu SWP workers produced mixed responses on their containment in Australia if they cannot obtain flights home. Some expressed disappointment - they were looking forward to returning home soon as they are nearing the end of their contracts. Some accepted the current situation and feel they will be fine, as long as they can continue working. Others welcomed the opportunity to stay in Australia and earn more money. Half of the ni-Vanuatu SWP workers spoken to said their employers will have enough work for them until between May and July this year. The others could possibly require employment with a different [Approved Employer](#) if they are to stay in work.

Both the Australian and New Zealand governments are considering extending the visas of current seasonal workers to enable them to continue working. This will be

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an essential measure to protect the welfare of workers caught in the travel bans and ensure they are not negatively impacted by a loss of work. With the closure of the borders, the Australian and New Zealand horticulture industries face a shortfall of labour as they cope with [no new arrivals](#). Granting visa extensions for those already in the country will help provide continuity of labour for growers, as well as support workers.

In addition to visa extensions for Pacific seasonal workers, there needs to be greater flexibility to shift workers between Approved Employers, within and between states/regions, subject to medical clearance of workers. This will help employers to access workers already in the country, supplement the loss of backpackers unable to travel, and will provide Pacific workers with continuous employment. For any workers with visas that are due to expire, they may require special temporary visas to remain in the country.

If there are instances of Pacific workers without seasonal employment or there are no flights to return home, some consideration must be given to how they will be financially supported, and to their pastoral care needs. Workers may require access to government financial assistance to enable them to pay for housing, food and other living essentials.

Workers' health and seeking medical treatment

As both countries shift to more aggressive strategies to contain the spread of COVID-19, it is essential that Pacific seasonal workers are provided with up-to-date information and education on the symptoms of the virus and measures that need to be taken if a worker becomes unwell. Pacific workers are often accommodated together in close quarters, with communal kitchen, living and bathroom facilities, making them more susceptible to a viral illness that is spread through close contact. Employers need to brief their workers on how the virus spreads, health and hygiene, and safe distancing measures. Education and awareness-raising campaigns could also be run through social media sites, which

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have in the past been effective for disseminating information among Pacific seasonal workers.

If workers are not provided with the right information in advance, there is a risk they may not follow preventative measures. If workers become unwell with the virus, there is also a chance they may not seek medical advice and testing, and may not self-quarantine. Barriers to accessing medical treatment for Pacific workers were highlighted well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier [research](#) on both the SWP and RSE schemes indicated workers avoid visiting the doctor and taking time off for illness, unless absolutely necessary, because they do not want to forfeit their daily earnings. Many SWP workers are also based in remote, rural areas, with relatively limited access to transport and may be reliant on others to get to/from medical centres. Workers therefore require immediate health advice on the symptoms of COVID-19, and where and how to seek assistance if needed.

All seasonal workers are required to hold medical insurance, with cover tied to the length of their work visa. Safeguards must be in place to ensure any workers whose visas are due to expire do not find themselves without medical cover. New Zealand's primary insurer of RSE workers, Orbit Protect, has indicated they will cover costs for workers diagnosed with COVID-19. In Australia, Labor's shadow Home Affairs Minister Kristina Keneally has asked the coalition to [extend visa deadlines and provide medical access for temporary visa holders](#), urging the government to "ensure that all temporary visa holders can access coronavirus testing and treatment on a doctor's recommendation, and where necessary, some form of income support".

Families at home

For workers' families in the Pacific, this will be a difficult time for them on two fronts. They may have to cope with the extended absence of their SWP/RSE worker, and not have the support of their absent worker at home for the family or

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wider community. Ensuring that seasonal workers have affordable and easy access to technologies to stay in touch during these times of uncertainty is paramount. Two groups of ni-Vanuatu SWP workers we spoke to received news of their extended stay in Australia on 20 March 2020, yet not all had discussed this new development with their families. It will be up to Approved Employers, the Australian and New Zealand governments and Pacific Labour Sending Units to make announcements to workers' families and communities to ensure that they are provided with the correct information and kept aware of workers' situations.

The return home

Vanuatu's High Commissioner to Australia has indicated he is working with Air Vanuatu to try to find solutions for ni-Vanuatu workers whose contracts are due to finish and wish to return home. When workers return to their home countries, should they undergo mandatory testing prior to their departure to reduce any potential spread of COVID-19? There is a risk some may return home without showing any symptoms in the early stages of the virus. Pacific countries have taken strong measures to ban inward travel and have imposed self-isolation periods for all new arrivals in recognition of limited capacity in their health systems to deal with a crisis. However, they may require additional assistance from Australia and New Zealand in the form of health assessments and testing for COVID-19 prior to workers travelling home to strengthen the response to the disease. The rapidly changing situation in both Australia and New Zealand makes it difficult to know how workers will be affected in the coming weeks, but it is essential to keep them in work if they stay longer in Australia and New Zealand, and keep them healthy.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

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