Queensland’s Fruit and Vegetable Industry: The Seasonal Labour Force - Characteristics, spatial behaviour and recruitment

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background
The findings presented here are derived from a study on the mobile seasonal labour force in the Queensland fruit and vegetable industry. The research was undertaken as part of an Honours thesis on seasonal mobility in the Queensland fruit and vegetable industry, undertaken in the School of Geography, Planning and Architecture at The University of Queensland. The study is linked to a larger project conducted by the Queensland Centre for Population Research on circular mobility within Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council.

The Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers offered support to the project by providing information on the fruit and vegetable industry in Queensland and identifying gaps in existing knowledge about the seasonal workforce, as well as helping to arrange contact with the growers who participated in the study and drawing attention to the project through media outlets.

Workers migrating between growing regions in Australia for the purpose of seasonal employment constitute the focus of this research. The primary objectives of the study were to identify the characteristics of workers in the seasonal labour force and understand the spatial and temporal dynamics of mobility between growing regions. In addition, QFVG expressed concerns about recruitment issues in the industry due to the seasonal labour shortage being experienced in many growing regions across Queensland. The study has responded to those concerns by exploring the nature of recruitment in the industry and seeking advice from major players about some steps that can be taken towards ameliorating human resource problems.
1.2 Structure of the Report

Three main areas are addressed in this report:

- the composition of the seasonal labour force,
- patterns of movement of workers over space and time, and
- recruitment of seasonal labour.

First, the research methodology will briefly be outlined. A typology of the seasonal labour force in Australia is then described, including a discussion of the major groups involved. Next, the demographic characteristics of the labour force are outlined, focussing on sex, age, family work units, and birthplace. Subsequently, the patterns of movement of seasonal workers over space and time will be described, including the distribution of growing locations across Australia and a summary of the spatial circuits followed by workers in the case study locations. Analysis focuses on length of stay, the proportion of workers returning to farms in the case study locations on a regular basis, and methods of travel and accommodation. The report then sets out an analysis of the factors that determine how work locations are selected. Seasonal recruitment issues are then addressed, including methods of recruitment, problems currently being experienced in meeting harvest requirements, perceptions of local labour, and major problems to be addressed. Finally, suggestions will be made on how the seasonal labour recruitment process could be improved, based on information provided by growers and recruitment agents.
2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

No official statistics are collected on seasonal workers employed in the fruit and vegetable industry in Australia. Therefore, it is a challenge to merely determine the number of workers involved in the industry, let alone develop a demographic profile of the workforce and measure the complex spatial and temporal dynamics of seasonal migration.

McAllister (2000) calculated the total number of individuals working as hired farm labour by disaggregating 1996 Census data and conducting a work category analysis on employees in the industry classification of agriculture. He was subsequently able to identify over 38,000 farm employees involved in horticulture in Australia. However, this figure does not relate to mobile seasonal workers alone. Furthermore, individuals living an itinerant lifestyle are among the most underenumerated at the Census, so it is likely that the Census count excludes a considerable number of seasonal migrants (ABS 2001).

Given that an estimate of the number of individuals in the seasonal labour force is difficult to produce, it is necessary to turn to estimates of the total number of positions available in an attempt to quantify the seasonal labour force. In 1999 the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business estimated that there were between 55,000 and 65,000 full time equivalent jobs available in harvesting in Australia, requiring several times that number of workers given high rates of turnover in the industry (NHTWG 2000). Brebner’s Workabout Australia (2002) supplies estimates of the number of positions to be filled in each growing region throughout the year, based largely on figures provided by the major recruitment agencies. The sum of these estimates results in a total of over 175,000 seasonal positions available in harvest areas around Australia. This figure is likely to be an underestimate given that not all growing regions have a formal recruitment agency with the resources to collect such data, and that methods of recruitment differ greatly between farms. While many growers use local
Harvest Offices or recruitment companies, others still rely primarily on word of mouth and workers approaching them directly.

In any event, Brebner’s (2002) estimates represent positions rather than equivalent full time jobs and are not directly comparable with the DEWRSB figures. Furthermore, both of these estimates include positions that will be taken up by locals, as well as by itinerant workers. While it is not possible to determine precisely the number of individuals involved in the mobile seasonal labour force, it is useful to consider these estimates to appreciate the magnitude of seasonal demand for labour in the fruit and vegetable industry.

Due to the void in data available on hired farm labour in general, and more specifically, those living an itinerant lifestyle, primary data collection represented the core of the research methodology. Three case study locations across Queensland represented the main focus of the fieldwork, which was conducted during July 2003. There were four key components to the fieldwork strategy. First, interviews were held with key informants at Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers. Second, interview schedules were applied to three distinctive respondent groups. The total sample comprised thirteen growers, five recruitment agents, and twenty workers. Each of the growers selected for interview employed a minimum of thirty seasonal workers per year, accounting for a broad sample of workers in each region. Third, field observation was conducted in three case study locations across Queensland; and finally, a limited attempt was made to employ participant observation by way of picking tomatoes in a selected case study location.

The case study locations shown in Figure 1 were selected to represent different crops and geographical locations. Gayndah is a citrus growing region located around 320km north-west of Brisbane, with the harvest taking place from March to September. Mundubbera is around 40km west of Gayndah, and has a resident population of around 2200 people. It is regarded as the “citrus capital of Queensland,” and the harvest takes place from April to October. Due to proximity and a similar agricultural profile, these two towns were considered as a single entity for the purpose of the current research.
The second case study location, Bowen, is a coastal town located halfway between Mackay and Townsville, with a resident population of nearly 12000 people. The tomato harvest takes place from around May to November and the mango harvest from approximately November to December. The third location, Tully, is located 140km south of Cairns with a resident population of around 2500 people. It is one of Australia’s largest banana producers, with year-round demand for workers peaking towards the end of the year and into January.

Figure 1: Case Study Locations

3. A TYPOLOGY OF THE WORKFORCE

Five main subgroups of workers have been identified through the fieldwork based on nature of employment in the industry, worker characteristics, and spatial behaviour. The typology is summarised in the table below.
Table 1: Proposed Typology of the Seasonal Labour Force

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Nature of Employment</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Spatial Behaviour</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Permanent Itinerants</strong></td>
<td>-permanently engaged in the seasonal labour force</td>
<td>• Greatest proportion of seasonal labour force in most areas, but decreasing in number in recent years • More males • Involved in all tasks, esp. picking, packing, thinning, pruning • Broad age structure; most mid-20s to 40s • Some couples travel and work together • Large proportion overseas-born</td>
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<td><strong>Retirees</strong></td>
<td>-employed sporadically either part-time or full-time in the seasonal labour force to supplement their income while 'seeing Australia'</td>
<td>• Increasing proportion of total labour force in recent years • Equal number of males and females • Mostly picking and packing • Most aged 40s to 50s, some early 60s • Many couples and convoys travelling and working together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Holiday Makers from Overseas (WHMOs)</strong></td>
<td>-spend short periods engaged in seasonal work employed under the Working Holiday Maker Scheme to supplement their income and enrich their travel experience</td>
<td>• Increasing proportion of total seasonal labour force in recent years • Relatively equal number of males and females • Mostly picking and packing • Aged 18 – 30, most early 20s • Many small groups of friends or couples travelling and working together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian Working Holiday Makers (AWHMs)</strong></td>
<td>-employed sporadically either part-time or full-time in the seasonal labour force to supplement their income while 'seeing Australia'</td>
<td>• Small proportion of total seasonal labour force • Equal number of males and females • Mostly picking and packing • Most aged 20s – 30s • Some small groups of friends or couples travelling and working together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td>-travel to harvest locations during vacation from tertiary studies; includes both Australian students and overseas exchange students</td>
<td>• Small proportion of total seasonal labour force • Equal number of males and females • Mostly picking and packing • Most aged in 20s • Some small groups of friends travel to growing location and work together</td>
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The first group, the Permanent Itinerants, represent the largest proportion of the seasonal labour force in Australia. The Retirees and Working Holiday Makers from Overseas (WHMOs) have recently emerged as the next most important groups satisfying temporary demand, and are steadily increasing in size. The last two groups, the Australian Working Holiday Makers and the Students, constitute the smallest proportion of the seasonal labour force.

Even though permanent itinerants still feature as the most significant component of the labour force in both Gayndah/Mundubbera and Bowen, recruiters in all regions acknowledged that this subgroup is in rapid decline. This is exemplified by one grower in Mundubbera who reported that in the past permanent itinerants made up about ninety percent of their seasonal workforce, but today comprise only around fifty percent. It appears that retirees and WHMOs are increasingly filling this widening void in labour supply.

While little information is available on the Retiree subgroup, it is possible to estimate the number of WHMOs involved in the seasonal labour force based on existing data. The WHMO subgroup is made up of eighteen to thirty year olds from a selection of approved countries, permitted to live and work in Australia for up to one year under the reciprocal Working Holiday Maker Program. Harding and Webster conducted a survey of 1001 WHMOs visiting Australia in 2002. Of the eighty-five percent of temporary entrants who were engaged in some form of employment, 15.9 percent were recorded as “fruit-pickers.” This represented the largest group for any single occupational classification. Aggregated with data for the number of Working Holiday Maker Visas granted for the year 1999-2000 (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003), this figure translates to an estimate of nearly eleven thousand WHMOs involved in seasonal work in 2000.

The number is likely to have expanded since 2000, given that all of the backpacker hostel operators interviewed for the current study recorded significant growth in the past few years in the number of WHMOs seeking seasonal work, and that they are currently expanding their operations. One
hostel operator acknowledged that occupancy had not dropped below eighty percent in the last two years. This reflects an increasing dependency on WHMOs to address the current shortfall in seasonal labour. In Tully for instance, growers reported that WHMOs can constitute around eighty percent of the visiting seasonal workforce.

One group that is rarely acknowledged in the literature are the single occasion workers, who travel to a growing location to engage in seasonal work, either with or without the intention of continuing next season, and decide to move back to a usual residence and out of the seasonal labour force all together on conclusion of their employment. This group were most likely not differentiated from permanent itinerants by growers in the current study, considering that employers are not aware of whether those workers will return next season. Due to the difficulties associated with predicting behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), any study to identify these workers would be inherently unreliable. As such, they do not warrant a separate classification in this study.

4. COMPOSITION OF THE SEASONAL LABOUR FORCE

4.1 Sex & the Gendered Division of Labour
While there are a greater proportion of men in the seasonal labour force, women are gradually closing the gap in the sex ratio, with several farms even reporting an equal number of males and females employed throughout the season. This is due largely to the relatively even ratio of men to women among the rapidly rising proportion of Working Holiday Makers and Retirees entering the seasonal labour force. Nevertheless, there appears to be a gendered division of labour, with women preferring work in packing sheds and men preferring work in the fields, where they believe they can earn the most money. Still, field observation from the current study established that many men of different ages can be found in packing jobs. On the other hand, women are most likely to take up picking jobs only as part of a couple, with couples who travel together more likely to take up picking than any other task.
Some of the younger women work in pairs to pick, particularly the younger WHMOs. However, very few are found picking alone.

4.2 Age

The current study revealed a wide variety of age groups involved in the seasonal labour force, with the age structure differing between population subgroups. The age of seasonal workers ranges from the twenties into the sixties, with the majority aged between twenty-five and fifty. Only a very small proportion are in their sixties, and those under twenty-five are often excluded at the discretion of growers, who generally prefer a more mature workforce.

Clearly retirees are the oldest subgroup, otherwise known as the “blue-rinse set,” with workers ranging from the ‘young retirees’ opting for a lifestyle change in their forties, to those still keen to work into their sixties to support themselves while ‘seeing Australia.’ Permanent Itinerants vary in age from the mid-twenties to the forties, and the range for the WHMO subgroup is predetermined by Visa regulations that dictate workers must be between eighteen and thirty, with growers reporting that most fall in their early to mid-twenties. Students are also usually aged in their early twenties, and considering that the youngest age recorded for workers was eighteen, those involved in the seasonal labour force must be tertiary rather than high school students. Finally, AWHMs vary in age across the twenties and thirties.

4.3 Family work units

Growers conceded that the family groups that travelled and picked or packed together in the past have all but disappeared under workplace health and safety regulations that forbid children from accompanying parents into the workplace. However, couples now represent an important component of the seasonal labour force, many of whom work as one under a single pay and tax file number.
A great proportion of the retirees taking part in the seasonal workforce do so as part of a couple, with several couples often travelling together in a convoy. Some WHMOs also travel as a couple, although many travel and work with friends in groups of two to four, often changing travelling partners at each location visited and/or accumulating new partners along the way. Permanent itinerants of the same ethnic origin often travel, work, and live together in groups, with many groups recruited by contracting services.

Solidarity is important among some groups of workers travelling together, creating difficulties for the recruitment process. If work is not available for everyone, the entire group is likely to leave the region. By the same token, if one worker is dismissed, the rest of the group may be inclined to resign from a job.

### 4.4 Birthplace

The permanent itinerant subgroup is made up of a large proportion of overseas born Australians. Among the rich diversity of backgrounds represented are a particularly large number of workers of Turkish, Chinese, English, New Zealand, Middle Eastern and Vietnamese descent.

WHMOs originate from a variety of countries across the developed world, with an agreement forged with Italy in 2003 taking the total number of countries with reciprocal Working Holiday rights to sixteen. The countries most frequently noted by recruiters include Canada, Germany, England, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, South Korea and Japan, with recruiters in Tully recognising a large number of workers of Jewish ethnicity.
5. PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT OVER SPACE AND TIME

5.1 Distribution of Growing Locations in Australia

Figure 2 is based on information assembled from Brebner’s (2002) guide to seasonal employment and the Job Network Harvest Trail guide (2003), both of which detail growing regions in Australia that require harvest labour from outside the local area. These locations are disproportionately located in the Eastern states, with growing regions in South Australia limited to the south-east of the State. While locations in Victoria and New South Wales are spread across those States, there is a concentration of regions along the border of the two States following the Murray River. Growing areas in Queensland are mostly concentrated in the east of the State, with those in the north disproportionately located directly on the coast. The few locations in Western Australia are scattered along the coastal fringe, concentrated mostly in the south-west. In Tasmania, growing regions sit near the northern and southern coasts, while in the NT the few regions are widely distributed.

Figure 2: Growing Regions Across Australia

Data Source: Brebner 2002; Job Network 2003.
5.2 Harvest Trails

It is possible to make a number of key observations about the spatial behaviour of the seasonal labour force based on information gathered in the fieldwork. The number of growing locations visited in a single year is generally small; usually only two or three, and distances travelled between regions vary considerably. Workers visit regions either within or across states, working with either the same or different crops at each location. Seasonal workers in the case study areas tended to select from the highly concentrated pool of locations in eastern Australia, and, to a lesser extent, in South Australia. This points to a spatial divide between the workers circulating the eastern and southern states and those circulating the north and west. It may simply be that the limited opportunities available in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are the main reason why these locations were not generally on the circuits identified by respondents. The growing significance of fruit and vegetable industries in places such as Ti Tree and Mataranka in the NT may increase flows between the north, west, and east of Australia.

Even though the pool of locations frequented by WHMOs was generally limited by proximity to major tourist spots, or areas such as Childers popularised by pioneering hoards of fruit picking WHMOs, the WHMO subgroup is more prepared to travel beyond the eastern states to WA or the NT. This was also true for the other groups motivated primarily by consumption-related objectives, namely the retirees and AWHMs. These subgroups have joined the seasonal labour force not primarily out of economic necessity, but rather to fund their travel around the country. In fact, the retirees and AWHMs visit the greatest pool of locations among all workers involved in the seasonal labour force in their bid to ‘see Australia,’ and do not fear to tread far beyond tourist hotspots to explore regional Australia.

Following are specific findings for each of the three case study locations. The nature of labour demand in each area is first outlined, then major circuits are identified.
Gayndah/Mundubbera

In Gayndah, demand for harvest labour begins toward the end of March and usually continues until around September. The harvest begins and ends a couple of weeks later in Mundubbera (these patterns of demand have been captured in the harvest calendar accompanying this paper, based on information drawn from Brebner’s *Workabout Australia* (2002)). The number of workers required in the region usually peaks from April to July, however, levels of demand over time differ from farm to farm. A feature common to both locations is the sharp rise in demand during the end of the first quarter or the start of the second, followed by a steep decline at the end of the third quarter. During the harvest the larger farms in the area employ between twenty-five and two hundred and fifty seasonal workers each from outside the local area, constituting up to sixty percent of the workforce at some farms.

Itinerant labour is recruited for picking, packing, pruning and thinning of the citrus crop, while more specialised tasks such as spraying are reserved for experienced locals. Thinning of citrus crops occurs from November to January in Gayndah and from January to March in Mundubbera. While some farms retain a small proportion of the seasonal workforce beyond the harvest for thinning, this sustained presence of temporary workers depends on the length of the harvest. In circumstances where the harvest is relatively short, harvest workers are dismissed and there is a break in demand for temporary labour for several months until thinning labour is required. Many workers are not prepared to bide their time, so a wave of workers leaves the region immediately after the harvest and a new, much smaller wave of labour is required to enter the region at the beginning of the thinning season.

While citrus dominates production in Gayndah/Mundubbera, other crops are also grown in the region, requiring small numbers of itinerant seasonal labour. The grape harvest takes place from November to December, and pruning from April to September. According to the local harvest offices, local labour is usually sufficient for the smaller crop in Gayndah, but fails to satisfy the larger
crop in Mundubbera. The mango crop also requires small numbers of itinerant seasonal workers for the harvest from November to January.

Growers commented that the seasonal labour force is now characterized by fewer returnees than ever before. Workers arrive in the region from a wide variety of places around the country, and no dominant circuit appears to exist. Similarly, on conclusion of the harvest, workers do not head in a large wave to a single destination, but rather move in small ripples away from Gayndah/Mundubbera to a large variety of destinations. Nevertheless, recruiters reported that the largest proportion of workers arrived in the region from the South.

While it is not common, some workers arrive in the region from Western Australia and Tasmania, although most of these are first-timers and do not return on a regular circuit. There are also temporary international migrants circulating between the citrus harvest in Gayndah/Mundubbera and other growing locations in New Zealand, and small family groups arrive from the Cook Islands each year. However, the number of these workers is also relatively small.

The major circuits followed by workers are shown in Figure 3. Locals report a long history of workers moving between Gayndah/Mundubbera and Victoria, arriving from the harvest of stone fruits in Cobram from December to April, or stone fruits followed by apples in Shepparton between December and April. Another stone fruit and apple growing location popular among citrus workers in Gayndah/Mundubbera is Stanthorpe, which is a relatively short travelling distance for mobile workers compared to the trip for those moving up from Shepparton or Cobram. Considering that the apple season generally continues into May, workers arriving from Shepparton and Stanthorpe need to decide whether to finish the apple season or arrive in Gayndah/Mundubbera in time for the beginning of the citrus harvest. As a result, workers who remain for the conclusion of the apple harvest drift into Gayndah/Mundubbera in a small wave several weeks after the first major flood of seasonal migrants.
Figure 3: Circuits Followed by Workers Visiting Gayndah/Mundubbera

Source: Fieldwork 2003
What is perhaps most striking is the number of intermediate opportunities that are leapfrogged by workers travelling along these established circuits. Furthermore, workers voluntarily dismiss year-round opportunities available in a single region in favour of travelling to a distant location for work. For example, a trail exists between Gayndah/Mundubbera and Mildura, where one of Australia’s largest grape harvests takes place between January and April, with some workers stopping off at the grape harvest in Menindee or Bourke along the way. Citrus is also harvested in Mildura, with positions available nearly all year round and demand peaking throughout winter and early spring. Nevertheless, many mobile workers prefer to travel to Gayndah/Mundubbera (over 1700km) for the citrus harvest, suggesting that mobility is a lifestyle choice for some workers in Australia. Alternately, in possibly one of the shortest moves among itinerant seasonal workers in Australia, some workers head to the stone fruit harvest in Kingaroy (170km) from September to December.

A number of workers also travel between Gayndah/Mundubbera and New South Wales. The cherry harvest in Young between November-December is a popular destination, after which work is available in Young on other crops on a smaller scale. There are also less prominent circuits within Queensland, such as that between Gayndah/Mundubbera and Emerald, where workers travel on conclusion of the harvest in September to start thinning the grape crops until October. They then have the opportunity to take advantage of picking jobs that continue until January.

Many permanent itinerants take their annual holiday on conclusion of the lengthy citrus season, before a large proportion of these workers head south to the locations outlined above. Some leave Gayndah/Mundubbera on conclusion of the citrus harvest around September and return to the region for the grape harvest in November. Others take their annual holiday before arriving in Gayndah/Mundubbera, particularly around Easter time, when it is extremely difficult to get workers at short notice.
Bowen

Tomatoes are one of Bowen’s largest crops and the tomato harvest stimulates the greatest demand in the region for seasonal workers. The larger farms in the area employ from fifty to over three hundred seasonal workers for picking and packing and associated tasks, such as distributing buckets to workers and carting full buckets back to the packing shed. Peak demand for harvest labour usually begins around the middle of May and declines steeply at the beginning of November. During this period some farms experience a gradual increase in demand until August/September, creating fierce competition for reliable labour at this time, when the best labourers have already secured employment.

The major circuits followed by workers are shown in Figure 4. Victoria again features as a prominent origin and destination for seasonal workers. It is clear that the most popular trail is that between the tomato harvest in Bowen and the harvest of stone fruits followed by apples in Shepparton between December and April, with workers taking a two to three week break on conclusion of the tomato harvest in November. Some workers combine their stop at Bowen on a circuit with both Gayndah/Mundubbera and Shepparton, staying for the beginning of the citrus season in Gayndah/Mundubbera before heading to the tomato harvest in Bowen and back to Shepparton to pick pears and then apples.
Figure 4: Circuits Followed by Workers Visiting Bowen

Source: Fieldwork 2003
In another long-established harvest trail that includes stops in the three eastern states, some workers move from Bowen to Mildura to pick grapes, then east to Batlow in NSW to pick apples before returning to Bowen in May. There are also instances where workers will visit a single location twice in a cycle. For example, some workers follow the tomato harvest from Bundaberg to Bowen and then return to Bundaberg before moving on to Shepparton. Other popular locations visited by workers on conclusion of the Bowen tomato harvest include Emerald, where there are opportunities in cotton chipping and citrus thinning and pruning across the year, and St George, where the melon harvest takes place from November to January and work is also available on a diverse variety of crops for the remainder of the year. Finally, one small group of overseas-born permanent itinerants had been travelling a trail between the tomato harvest in Bowen and the grape harvest just outside of Adelaide for the past three years.

Other evidence from growers in Bowen suggests that workers of the same ethnic backgrounds often travel around circuits in a group. Some of these trails appear to be unique, such as that followed by the Pacific Islanders who work on prawn trawlers off the northern coast of Queensland before heading down to the tomato harvest in Bowen. Other trails are more common, such as those followed by the Vietnamese and Turkish gangs moving under the direction of labour contracting companies between Bowen and Shepparton, where they have an established recruitment office, and between Bowen and Bundaberg, following a tomato trail.

WHMOs arrive in Bowen from Ayr and Bundaberg, with others doubling back down the coast from Tully. All respondents agreed that most backpackers go to a popular tourist spot after leaving Bowen, with many heading to Cairns and an increasing number heading to the Whitsundays, perhaps influenced by tours organized through the backpacker hostel.

The mango harvest takes place between November and December, with a small proportion of the seasonal workforce required to stay on until the start of April. Mango growers reported their heavy reliance on WHMOs arriving from
mango harvests in Darwin and Katherine or the watermelon harvest in Carnarvon, before they moved on to holiday in Cairns. Victorians are also an important feature of the mango harvest workforce, with some workers staying on after the tomato harvest before returning to Shepparton.

**Tully**

Labour requirements for the banana crop are spread across the whole year, with demand in Tully amplified in the second half of the year through to January. Again, there are variations in demand from farm to farm, but there is a call for workers from outside the local area throughout the year. Therefore, should workers be prepared to shift between tasks, and perhaps between employers depending on where demand exists, yearlong employment is available in the region. Growers reported that a very small number of workers do take advantage of such opportunities and relocate to the area. However, this relocation usually only spans a year or two before the worker gets itchy feet and decides it is time to move on.

Considering that WHMOs constitute the greatest proportion of seasonal harvest labour visiting Tully (around eighty percent), recruiters are most familiar with this subgroup, and information gathered on circuits followed by workers entering the region pertains principally to them. Furthermore, growers acknowledged that permanent itinerants who visit the area move to and from a far greater selection of work locations than the limited pool visited by WHMOs, making it difficult to pinpoint common circuits.

Regions frequented by WHMOs visiting Tully are shown in Figure 5. Recruiters suggested that most WHMOs make their way up the coast from the south of the country. However, unlike the Australian workers in Bowen and Gayndah/Mundubbera, very few arrive in Tully directly from Victoria. This is likely to be linked with the fact that the greatest proportion of WHMOs enter the country via Sydney, with some stopping in Bundaberg or Bowen on their way to Tully and subsequently enjoying leisure time in far North Queensland.
Figure 5: Regions Frequent by WHMOs Visiting Tully

Tully features as one of the most important springboards to Cairns, due to its proximity. Local recruiters claim that nearly all WHMOs head to Cairns after earning money in Tully, with some returning once or twice to replace the earnings they have spent before moving on. A small proportion of workers diverge from the northbound flow by entering the country in Cairns, often after travelling through South East Asia, before heading south to Tully. Others sweep west across the north of the country from Tully to Mareeba then Darwin, while some start at the opposite end of the country in Darwin, stopping in Mareeba on their way to Tully before ending up in Sydney. A smaller number start in the far West, landing in Perth and working on the melon harvest in Kununurra before heading into Cairns then Tully.

Source: Fieldwork 2003
5.3 Length of Stay

Evidence from the case study locations has shown that length of stay differs between and within subgroups. While it is possible to obtain work at many locations across the country in a single year, most permanent itinerants prefer to work the whole harvest season at each location they visit, generally resulting in a stay of several months. This limits travelling costs and the amount of down-time. All growers interviewed also prefer this pattern of employment as it secures labour for the duration of the harvest, reducing recruitment and training costs. Subsequently, growers can be reluctant to hire inexperienced workers intent on staying in the region only a short time. This was particularly the case in Gayndah and Mundubbera, where some growers remarked that due to the specific handling requirements of the citrus crops, experienced pickers who are likely to stay the length of the season and develop there skills over time are preferred.

It is for this reason that some growers are reluctant to recruit WHMOs. Under the Working Holiday Maker Program, WHMOs are permitted to spend no more than three months with a single employer (DIMIA 2003). The length of stay of students is obviously limited by the structure of formal vacation periods, while Retirees and AWHMs may spend from a few weeks to several months in a location, depending on leisure plans and financial considerations.

The total time spent engaged in the seasonal labour force differs between subgroups and between individuals within the same subgroup. Obviously permanent itinerants are the group spending the greatest amount of time in the labour force, with those interviewed having spent three to six years in seasonal work. Retirees and AWHMs may spend from a single month-long stint to several years of intermittent involvement in the workforce, while students often only spend a single occasion on seasonal work. The clearest boundaries are set for WHMOs, who are permitted only one year in the country under Visa regulations. Furthermore, based on evidence from the fieldwork, very little of that year is spent actually engaged in work, and the industry of work often varies.
5.4 Returnees

A popular stereotype of seasonal work is that the same workers return to a location year after year at much the same time, from similar origins, carrying out a repetitive circuit across the landscape. However, the evidence from the fieldwork reported here indicates that the number of returnees differs between regions and between farms in the same region.

Many growers endeavour to secure a core labour force for the following year on conclusion of each harvest by confirming returnee opportunities with reliable workers. Still, several growers acknowledged that they moved workers on after they have been returning for up to five to six years; otherwise the decision is made by the long-term workers themselves.

What was consistently acknowledged by growers in all regions was the considerable decrease in the proportion of returnees in the past five years or so. While this is likely to indicate a reduction in the total number of permanent itinerants, it may also indicate that either the total amount of time spent engaged in the seasonal labour force is declining or that permanent itinerants are becoming more adventurous and branching out to new destinations.

The nature of returnee circulation among WHMOs is based more on microcircuits of return moves over a short time period, wherein WHMOs move out of the region for leisure time and return once or twice to replace money spent on leisure. Such is the pattern exhibited by WHMOs moving between Tully and Cairns or Bowen and the Whitsundays.

The current research also indicated that most permanent itinerants do not return to a permanent residence on a regular basis. On the contrary, workers from various walks of life have joined the seasonal labour force as part of a major lifestyle change, selling their property and disenfranchising themselves from a single home base in order to embrace the freedom of a mobile lifestyle that is sustained by seasonal work. Shrewd marketing strategies to recruit workers might take advantage of such perceptions of freedom that are commonly associated with work in the seasonal labour force.
5.5 Summarising the Space-Time Dynamics

The space-time dynamics outlined above have been summarised in the following table:

Table 2: Summarising the Space-Time Dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Results</th>
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| distribution of growing locations              | • Based on physical and economic factors  
|                                                | • Scattered across the continent  
|                                                | • Concentration of locations in the eastern states  
|                                                | • Locations in WA, QLD and Tasmania concentrated in coastal areas  
|                                                | • NT locations isolated  
|                                                | • Similar crops grown considerable distances apart  |
| length of stay                                 | • Maximum potential stay varies based on crop type and task performed  
|                                                | • Differences between groups – most permanent itinerants stay length of season, WHMOs tend to stay only 4 – 12 weeks  |
| established circuits                           | • Usually only 2 or 3 locations visited in a year  
|                                                | • Several established circuits exist but many workers frequently change locations  
|                                                | • Overall number of returnees is declining  
|                                                | • Location preference overrides tyranny of distance  
|                                                | • WHMOs frequent a smaller pool of locations than Australian workers, predominantly along the eastern seaboard, but are prepared to travel greater overall distances between locations than permanent itinerants  |
| factors influencing spatial and temporal distribution of workers | • Crop Specificity – preference for working with a single crop to increase efficiency or otherwise a variety of crops to avoid boredom  
|                                                | • Task Specificity – type of task affects time of arrival and departure and length of stay; mobility between industries also determines location of work  
|                                                | • Location-Specific Factors – preference for working at a specific location for reasons not associated with task or crop type  
|                                                | • Enabling/Limiting Factors – capacity of the individual to meet the demands of a specific crop  
|                                                | • Organisational Structures – recruitment networks sustaining the industry play a role in determining where workers travel to through recruitment strategies and media  |

5.6 Travel and Accommodation

Many Australian seasonal workers, across all subgroups with the exception of students, travel with a mobile home, reducing accommodation costs at work locations to site rent only. Another popular mode of transport is by car, with many still regularly hitching a ride between locations. These workers either
hire a camp site and pitch a tent, or otherwise hire a cabin or similar shelter and pay increased accommodation costs at each destination. It becomes evident that camping is quite a popular way of living when one is confronted with the ‘tent city’ that furnishes the landscape of caravan parks at growing locations.

Many WHMOs appear to travel by coach between locations, while others pool their resources to purchase a cheap car for their travels in Australia. The majority lodge at the many backpacker hostels that are popping up and expanding in size at growing locations on the beaten WHMO track. Most hostel operators prefer not to offer accommodation to Australian workers, given the problems they have experienced in the past with theft and assault related to alcoholism. As a disincentive, some hostels charge a sizable bond to Australian applicants (around $250), which usually dissuades most workers.

Accommodation providers generally double as farm work recruitment agents and travel guides, and some hostel operators even as chauffeurs. Some farms are located up to 30km from town, and while a few growers allow workers to live on-site during the harvest, either in their own caravans or tents or in on-site cabins, most workers retire to lodgings in town. In recent years many growers have reduced the number of workers allowed to live on-site, or banned the practice altogether, due largely to Occupational Health and Safety considerations and domestic disputes among family units travelling together. Therefore, many workers rely on transport provided by growers or hostels to take them to and from work. Growers are happy to provide buses in places like Tully that are heavily reliant on WHMOs, to pick up and drop off workers at a central point each day. In places like Bowen, where WHMOs make up a smaller component of the workforce, hostels generally oblige.
6. DECIDING WHERE TO WORK

The selection of work locations is mediated by a number of variables, including preference for working with a particular crop or variety of crops; the task performed by the worker; a preference for working at a particular location; or the capacity of the individual to carry out a task.

- **Crop Specificity**
  Some workers said they prefer to experience new crops and different locations to avoid getting bored with harvest work, resulting in variable trails followed over the period of engagement in the seasonal labour force. The difficulty of working with certain crops deters some workers from visiting particular locations, explaining why a large proportion of the temporary workforce in Tully is made up of WHMOs. Bananas are regarded as one of the most difficult crops to work with, and WHMOs are likely to be the least exposed to this sort of ‘inside information.’ They are also more prepared to endure difficult conditions due to the temporary nature of their engagement not only with the crop, but with harvest work in general.

Some workers like to follow the harvest trail of a single crop type, so they can become more efficient in picking through repetition and improve their earnings when being paid at piece-rates. Should there be a significant shift in wage structures towards an hourly rate of pay, fewer workers would be inclined to plan their migration around a single crop, as income remains the same regardless of the maximum number of pieces picked. As one worker commented, individuals aren’t likely to be concerned with their own efficiency when there is no incentive to achieve beyond the minimum requirements.

- **Task Specificity**
  A preference for working on a specific task can also lead workers to areas where crops are grown that require large numbers of workers for specialist
tasks. For example, workers may be lead to areas where crops that have rigorous pruning requirements are grown, such as peach and nectarine growing areas.

As well as shifting between tasks within the fruit and vegetable industry, mobility between seasonal work and other occupations is an important determinant of the spatial circuits followed by some workers. This form of mobility is particularly prominent among WHMOs, most of whom spend part of their time working in capital cities, particularly in clerical, sales and service positions, before or after their stint in the seasonal labour force.

• Location-Specific Factors
The decision to travel to a particular growing location may also be founded on the character of the place itself rather than the type of seasonal work on offer there. As already discussed, WHMOs gravitate toward significant tourist destinations such as Bundaberg and Tully, while permanent itinerants are more likely to travel to inland locations offering limited opportunities for thrill-seeking holidaymakers. The small number of WHMOs in Gayndah/Mundubbera may be explained by the two hours travelling time to the coast, where most major tourist centres are located.

Several recruiters acknowledged that the weather, particularly the heat, also plays an important role in the decision to migrate to a specific location. This factor is of particular concern in areas such as Tully that are heavily reliant on WHMOs, as most source countries of workers do not experience the heat of North Queensland, explaining why growers in Tully experience increased difficulty in attracting workers across the summer months.

• Enabling/Limiting Factors
Just as some workers favour locations due to preferences for working with particular crops, others are not eligible to work with certain crops for physical reasons, subsequently eliminating certain locations from their
potential harvest trail. For example, the age and associated physical ability of retirees is the reason they are rarely found working in Tully, due to the difficulty of working with bananas. By the same token, it is the physical attributes of the young, fit WHMOs that underpin their compatibility with the demanding banana and mango crops.

7. RECRUITMENT OF SEASONAL LABOUR

7.1 The organisational structure – getting in ‘The Loop’

The distribution of the workforce is not merely a product of the collective responses of individuals, it is also influenced by the complex organisational structure supporting the industry. Government and private enterprise in Australia have collaborated to develop an intricate system of support networks to sustain, facilitate, and indeed stimulate optimum conditions for an itinerant workforce to meet seasonal human resource demands nation-wide, at the same time as combating unemployment. The privatisation of employment services has lead to the involvement of several employment agencies in the recruitment of seasonal labour, including Oz-Jobs, Joblink Plus, MADEC, and WES.

Through these “Harvest Labour Service Providers” a band of Harvest Offices have evolved that devote their resources exclusively to the recruitment of seasonal workers, often working out of caravan parks and backpacker hostels. These offices have a ‘gatekeeper’ function in stimulating the movement of workers between harvest regions through their communication networks that cross the states. The uneven distribution of harvest offices around the country means that some regions are better serviced than others, placing these regions in better stead for attracting a greater proportion of the pool of workers migrating across the country. Growers who develop and maintain links with this network derive the benefits of remaining in ‘the loop’ with workers.
Backpacker hostels involved in seasonal labour recruitment play an important role in stimulating trails by encouraging workers to head to particular locations, with some formally affiliated with recruitment agencies and others providing the service to their occupants independent of any formal kickbacks. It is in this respect that the reputation of a growing location in its dealings with a subgroup of the workforce can have an important impact on the spatial distribution of the workforce by influencing who chooses to work where. The positive experiences of workers in Tully have attracted a steady flow of WHMOs to the region, effectively averting a major labour crisis in the area given the declining number of permanent itinerants passing through the region. By the same token, reputation can act to dissuade workers from heading to a location. Some recruiters felt that negative feelings have affected recruitment of WHMOs in Childers (BBC 2002), after the fire deaths of WHMOs there in 2000. Similarly, many are reluctant to go to Bundaberg after the murder of a backpacker there in 2002 (Guardian 2003) and harsh reported treatment of other WHMOs by growers in the region.

Advancements in communication technologies are creating a shift in the way the labour force is seeking access to information about work, increasing the role of the media in the recruitment of seasonal labour. The proactive measures of organisational structures are supported by a plethora of information available in books and on websites developed by regional government offices and private enterprise about working with different crops, the location of growing regions, and how to go about obtaining work. Brebner’s (2002) Workabout Australia is currently the most comprehensive resource. The Australian Jobsearch website (www.jobsearch.gov.au) devotes an entire section to information about work on the “harvest trail”, with a recruitment hotline also providing reliable, up-to-the-minute information on jobs and a “National Harvest Guide” to be released online in the near future. However, at this stage the website is regarded by recruiters as scattered and not always up-to-date nor reliable.

While word of mouth and gate-calling are still particularly important job tactics among permanent itinerants searching for work, those new subgroups
temporarily entering the seasonal labour force while ‘seeing Australia’ are not
generally privy to inside information and rely heavily on media resources for
information on work opportunities. The increasing participation of these new
subgroups in the seasonal labour market, particularly WHMOs and retirees,
will result in an even greater role for media in future recruitment. Even though
WHMOs often act on advice from their peers, and tend to frequent similar
locations, internet resources and publications such as Lonely Planet
(regarded by one hostel operator as the ‘The Backpacker’s Bible’) and TNT
backpacker magazine are still regarded as invaluable sources.

7.2 Methods of recruitment
There are several methods used by growers to recruit seasonal labour from
outside the local area. The Harvest Offices located in Gayndah and
Mundubbera represented the most important vehicle for recruitment among
growers in the region. Both offices operate out of local caravan parks, proving
particularly convenient for workers. Other independent recruitment agencies
not formally affiliated with the network of Harvest Labour Service Providers,
under the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, were not
nearly as popular among growers in each of the case study regions, and in
fact had quite a poor reputation among growers in terms of the reliability of
workers provided. There is a perception among some growers that workers
using recruitment agencies are often those forced to look for work under
welfare arrangements.

The backpacker hostel is increasing in popularity as a source of labour in
Bowen, and is particularly seen as an important and reliable avenue for last
minute recruitment. In Tully, recruitment of seasonal workers relies heavily on
the local backpacker hostel, given that WHMOs constitute the greatest
proportion of seasonal workers from outside the local area. It is common for
hostels to contact growers to find work for their residents, or for WHMOs to
offer a friend to take over their position when they leave an area. When there
is an undersupply of labour in a region, hostel operators endeavour to “spread
the word down the backpacker chain” and attract workers from other WHMO
hotspots. Due to delays in communication, this method can take up to a week to attract labour, but is usually very effective. There is a hostel in Bowen currently conducting an ongoing survey of how workers find out about harvesting jobs available in the region, in order to improve methods of attracting WHMOs to the area. The most popular response so far has been “word of mouth.”

Several growers still rely predominantly on returnees and word of mouth to secure seasonal labour forces, with many workers prearranging work by phoning the grower before entering the region. Often, permanent itinerants return the following season with a friend to farms where conditions are good. However, even the largest growers acknowledged that while they are well known on “the circuit,” informal channels have been returning fewer workers in recent years and may not satisfy demand in the near future.

Burgeoning recruitment problems and administrative duties have resulted in an increasing trend toward labour contracting services. However, some growers were reluctant to enlist the service of contractors for fear of being taken held to should a dispute arise with the company. Given the difficulty of obtaining workers altogether, let alone at short notice, if the contractor were to pull the plug on the workforce, the grower would be left with a rotting crop.

Informal labour referral networks have developed between some growers, both within the same region and across different regions. Growers sometimes contact one another with requests to refer excess workers during their harvest or otherwise encourage workers to visit a particular farm on conclusion of their harvest. This is in stark contrast to the “labour wars” apparently going on between some other growers.

Other informal methods have evolved such as the establishment of central meeting points where workers congregate to be recruited by growers at the last minute. For example, the Tully post office is a daily early morning meeting point that represents a crucial link in the recruitment process for many
growers. The traditional method of advertising in local newspapers was acknowledged as a vehicle for recruitment by only very few growers.

The evolving organisational structure has had an important impact on the way in which workers seek employment and growers seek employees. While informal job search techniques still feature as key vehicles of recruitment, formal recruitment structures are gaining the confidence of workers and growers and seem likely to increase in importance in the future.

### 7.3 Meeting harvest requirements

The severity of the labour shortage affecting the fruit and vegetable industry in Australia varies between growing regions. Shortages were perhaps least prominent in the Gayndah and Mundubbera area, with many farm gates adorned with signs commanding “No Gatecallers.” The Harvest Offices play an important role in maintaining equilibrium in their local area, and while some farms had experienced labour shortages in recent years, most recruiters believed there is often an oversupply of labour in the region. However, it is important to acknowledge the marked reduction in the number of returnees to farms in Gayndah and Mundubbera, which suggests a reduction in workforce security and predictability, and perhaps even looming recruitment problems in the future.

Growers in Bowen occasionally experience labour shortages, acknowledging that the most severe problem in the past few years has been the quality of available labour during peak harvest times. Growers indicated that harvest labour forces are secured as early as possible, as most professionals are employed early on in the season and only less efficient workers are available during peak times. As a safeguard, some growers hire workers earlier than absolutely necessary and put them on shorter days to begin with. WHMOs have been crucial in warding off shortages in the region in the past two years, particularly during the mango harvest.
Growers in Tully acknowledged that labour shortages have grown progressively worse over the past two to six years. During the sugar harvest from June to September, many locals temporarily leave the banana industry for more desirable work available in the sugar industry. Even greater recruitment problems are experienced over the summer period, due to accelerated ripening combined with harsh weather conditions and a large number of workers taking holidays at the same time.

Sometimes the situation gets quite desperate; and when market prices are high workers are taken off other jobs to pick bananas. One grower even felt that the difficulty of finding skilled labour, coupled with little sense of job attachment among many workers, has curbed the growth of the banana industry, given the amount of time wasted on recruitment and training and the challenge of increasing production rates when workforces are scant. Locals are known to frequently move between farms, and WHMOs are limited to a three month period of employment with each employer, creating a continuous flow of job openings at many farms.

Some farms experience difficulties in recruiting labour for secondary crops that do not attract large waves of workers to an area, including the grape harvest in Mundubbera that occurs well after the conclusion of the major citrus harvest. Problems have been worse in Bowen, where the mango season begins several weeks after the conclusion of the tomato season. Workers are not prepared to wait around in the region to be recruited for the mango harvest when they have the opportunity to head just over 100km north to the Burdekin Shire where the mango season starts two to three weeks earlier than in Bowen. This has created significant recruitment problems for mango farmers in the past few years, with one farm in the region claiming losses valued at over $75,000 worth of mangoes in 2002 due to a shortage of pickers.

Mango growers stressed the difficulty of developing awareness of their problems, given that they are not among the biggest producers in the area due to the weight of the tomato and vegetable industry at large. As a
consequence, one local backpacker hostel closes down between December and April with the perception that there is no demand for workers, believing that the mango harvest is satisfied mostly by family workers.

Growers also maintained that there has been a deterioration in worker loyalty and pointed to the onset of ‘worker wars’ between growers, with large operations dominating smaller farms. During the peak harvest when demand for labour is at its highest point, it is suggested that large producers lure workers away from smaller growers with increased wages over short periods of time.

Due to the increasing difficulty of securing a labour force during the harvest, one grower felt that the fruit and vegetable industry may see a shift from the production of fresh produce to processed foods. This would reduce dependency on a reliable workforce, given that quality is bound to be compromised in the near future should recruitment problems persist.

There have been calls to permit temporary international migration of workers to Australia to satisfy demand for seasonal labour (see Hugo 2001) and there are already a number of New Zealanders entering the country temporarily to work on the harvest under the Trans-Tasman agreement. However, concerns have emerged about the impact of introducing cheap labour from overseas on wages and working conditions.

Industrial relations matters arose as points of contention among both workers and growers. Workers were particularly concerned with the widespread shift in wage structures from piece-rates to hourly wages, inhibiting the earning capacity of highly efficient workers. On the other hand, farmers stressed the struggle to remain competitive with markets in South America and South Africa, where low crop production costs are attributable to minuscule wages.
7.4 Local labour

Locals constitute varying proportions of the seasonal workforce across farms within and between regions, ranging from approximately ten to eighty percent of workers. The quality of local labour engaged in seasonal work is reportedly of a good standard. However, there is a loss of faith on the part of the growers in the capacity of local populations at large to address demand for seasonal labour. Most growers reported negative experiences with some locals in terms of diligence and were frustrated with the lack of interest among the unemployed given that the availability of work is well publicised. Indeed, growers asserted that locals are given first preference for all positions, and recruitment agents maintain that they generally attempt to contact locals first before offering work to visitors.

However, many of the growers interviewed in the current study also put the view that the availability of welfare payments act as a disincentive among the local population. Evans and Lewis (1986) and Lewis (1990) have expanded this argument to suggest that the poor reported working and income conditions in the farm sector have created a ‘poverty trap,’ wherein the difference between wages in some farm jobs and unemployment benefits is so meagre that unemployment benefits act as a disincentive to work.

Some locals argue that backpackers are taking jobs that could be filled by unemployed locals. In reality, most recruiters conceded that WHMOs are regarded as a ‘last resort,’ recruited when no locals or permanent itinerants are available. In reality, however, a strong case can be made that WHMOs have been a saving grace for the banana industry in Tully, and also for the mango harvest in Bowen. Even though the number of full-time, permanent positions at individual farms in the fruit and vegetable industry is quite low, the difficulty of replacing permanent employees was a problem acknowledged by several growers.
7.5 Problems to be addressed

Several diverse issues were consistently identified by growers and recruitment agents as hindering human resource management in the industry. First, growers perceive alcoholism and drug addiction to be major problems among permanent itinerants. One consequence is the accelerated severity of recruitment problems on Fridays – the day after pay day. Most growers claimed that some workers simply did not turn up on Fridays, creating the stigma of a bad work ethic among permanent itinerants.

On the other hand, many growers are happy to recruit WHMOs, whom they see as hard workers with the specific goal of making money to spend on leisure time. Hostel operators assert that they have worked hard to promote professionalism among occupants, addressing identity issues associated with WHMOs in regard to perceptions of rowdiness with strict enforcement of ground rules. According to growers, the main limitation of WHMOs is the limited amount of time spent with each employer.

The second major frustration expressed by growers was workers from non-English speaking backgrounds providing incorrect taxation details. Communication problems between growers and workers made it difficult to clarify matters, with some individuals’ tax forms returned to growers from the Australian Taxation Office several times. Growers noted that they were unsure whether such instances were deliberate acts of deception or whether workers were simply confused about how to correctly fill out forms.

WHMOs filling out the taxation form were also confused by an ambiguous question about the “tax free threshold.” Several growers suggested that forms be clarified and assistance with filling out forms for ESL workers become more accessible. It was suggested that shifting the onus of checking tax details from the grower to the taxation office would ease the administrative burden on the industry.

Finally, it was alleged that some hostels and caravan parks formally affiliated with employment agencies tied recruitment assistance to accommodation,
only recruiting those workers paying for lodgings. If true, this may point to a need for agencies funded by government to be monitored, since this practise would hinder the capacity for the unemployed to obtain work and eliminate a large pool of potential recruits from an industry suffering a desperate labour shortage.

It is also believed that some hostels and other accommodation providers attract an oversupply of workers with promises of employment, creating a surplus in one growing region to the detriment of other areas experiencing labour shortages. Honest operators were angered by such practices, which they see as reflecting badly on the function of independent contractors in the recruitment process. Some growers were sceptical about recruiting through accommodation providers because workers evicted from lodgings on grounds of bad behaviour tend to forfeit their job as well, accelerating workforce turnover.

7.6 Suggestions to address human resource problems

Growers and recruitment agents were asked to offer suggestions for improving the recruitment and management of seasonal workforces. A host of ideas were shared by all respondents across the three case study locations.

Growers were largely supportive of the introduction of a basic training course to develop the farm skills and OHS awareness of workers before they arrive on-farm. The introduction of the Farm Ready Card in the Lockyer Valley seems to be a positive step towards developing a consistent core seasonal workforce, and the scheme might usefully be extended across the country.

Several respondents called for local information sessions to be arranged to inform growers about effective strategies for employing seasonal and permanent labour. Also, Harvest Offices are servicing only very few areas at this stage, and it was seen as useful to establish “partner office” agreements across regions to ensure a steady flow of workers between locations.
Recruitment agents are also being called on to improve methods of filtering workers to ensure only committed staff are provided to farms. Some growers suggested the introduction of a short contract wherein a proportion of the worker’s wages were withheld until the contract is fulfilled, with workers subsequently going on to full weekly wages. This would reduce waste in recruitment and training as a result of high turnover.

Many growers are also keen to shift the responsibility of checking Visas and tax details from the grower to government authorities, or otherwise believe that employers should be provided with training to better understand Visa and taxation regulations. It was suggested that changing regulations should be communicated to growers through local Harvest Offices or Centrelink offices, where representatives could act as points of reference for growers and workers. A central register of workers involved in the seasonal labour force was also seen as a means to avert problems. Furthermore, most growers felt that documentation should be made clearer.

Recruitment agents suggested that growers provide more notice, where possible, of their estimated demand for workers. This would enable accommodation providers to use recruitment networks to attract appropriate numbers of workers to the region in time to service demand.

Growers made several suggestions for improving workforce retention based on positive experiences in the past. First, they believed that improvements to accommodation in terms of facilities provided and proximity to farms would increase the likelihood of workers visiting a region, and revisiting the same farm. For some growers, payment of bonuses has been a successful way of motivating workers. Other growers have found that providing potential for advancement to supervisory roles is an effective way to attract workers to return each year. One grower who provides training to workers in areas such as OHS, forklift driving, and chemical use reported good retention rates among permanent and seasonal workers.
Growers felt that the income potential for workers earning piece rates needs more exposure. It seems likely that many potential recruits are unaware that hard workers can earn above average wages. Furthermore, it was suggested that the reputation of particular crops, such as bananas, needs to be improved so that workers are not deterred and will at least attempt the work themselves.

According to both growers and workers, it is of optimum importance for employers to offer good working conditions in order to secure a workforce for the following harvest season, and ensure workers don’t leave before the end of the harvest. Word of mouth is powerful among permanent itinerants and negative feedback about a farm can have significant consequences.

One of the suggestions that was emphasised at most farms where severe labour shortages were experienced was for the Working Holiday Maker Program to be expanded to include as many countries as possible, including the United States, to maximise the WHMO labour market.

Recruiters believed that many workers arrive at growing locations unprepared and expect to obtain accommodation and work immediately. They suggested workers should be advised to arrange employment before arriving in a region and have enough money for living expenses for at least two weeks. It was also stressed that workers needed to appreciate that it is not the role of hostels and other accommodation providers to ‘guarantee’ jobs to them before their arrival in a region.

Growers also reported being disappointed in the general appearance of some workers when applying for a job. This is an important point considering that many growers commented that they are often able to determine whether an individual is likely to be a “good worker” who will remain for much of the season, increasing the likelihood of offering them a job.

Several growers made a point of noting that farm operators today are generally keen to embrace new initiatives. Policy makers can be confident in assuming that many establishments would be interested in considering
proposals to improve methods of labour recruitment and human resource management, in order to enhance productivity in the fruit and vegetable industry.

8. Conclusion

Despite the significance of the mobile seasonal labour force to the Queensland fruit and vegetable industry, very little research has been done on seasonal workers to date. This study has taken some first key steps by sketching who is involved in the workforce and the spatial and temporal dynamics of labour mobility. The typology proposed here remains to be tested in other geographical locations around the country.

One of the findings most pertinent to the fruit and vegetable industry is that while permanent itinerants still dominate the seasonal labour force overall, there has been a decrease in their representation in the last few years. This points to declining confidence in the capacity of growers to anticipate workforces from year to year, threatening production and even industry growth. Action will be needed to attract new workers to the industry on a long term basis, so as to reduce dependency on provisional forms of labour such as WHMOs and Retirees. Several suggestions made by growers and recruitment agents to improve recruitment processes and the management of seasonal workforces have been summarised here in the interest of sustaining the industry by enhancing labour supply.

It is important to stress that the findings reported here are based on a comparatively small sample of respondents in a limited number of case study locations. Further understanding of the structure and dynamics of the fruit and vegetable industry would benefit significantly from more comprehensive research conducted in Queensland and other parts of Australia, to better inform policy and planning in the industry.
Reference List


