

NT FARMERS



NORTHERN AUSTRALIA
FOOD FUTURES
CONFERENCE 2021

Timor Leste Pilot Partnership Program

Unlocking Mutual Benefits



Introduction

The Northern Territory Farmers Association (NT Farmers) proposes establishing a 'Timor Leste Ag Worker Partnership Program'. The initiative will bring together industry, unions, labour hire companies and governments to support Timorese agricultural workers contribute to Northern Territory (NT) farms.

The program will also provide a range of upskilling pathways and social support services to workers with the aim of enhancing every worker's experience and expand their personal and career development goals. This will have the added benefit of improving each participants well-being and minimize the likelihood of visa violations. The program has been specifically designed to address the skills development needs of workers to ensure that they are productive and versatile on Territory farms and that can make a valuable contribution to the Timor Leste agricultural sector.

The program will be governed by a steering committee comprised of growers, representatives from the Timor Leste Consulate, NT Farmers, unions, labour hire companies, representatives from DFAT, Border Force, the Department of Immigration and the Northern Territory Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade among other stakeholders. The steering committee will play an essential role in assisting the program to achieve successful outcomes for workers, industry, and domestic and Timor Leste governments.

The steering committee will provide governance oversight and strategic direction to two regionally based support officers in the NT. The officers' roles will be to support workers while they are in country and to act as a conduit for information and reporting between the workers and the steering committee. The positions will assist in arranging group training for workers, to link workers with NGO and community support services and to provide oversight to ensure that all workers are being treated fairly on farms.

Not only does this project aim to build participants skills, but it also has the potential to act as an extremely effective soft diplomacy tool for our region. It will also help to ensure that Northern Territory farms remain an attractive place for people of all backgrounds to work. The program will improve opportunities for workers to upskill and earn more while on farms as well as providing an effective mechanism to guarantee the positive treatment of farm workers.

It is important to note that the program will operate under the PALM scheme, it does not propose significant changes or modification to this initiative. Instead, the program will play an essential role in testing small adjustments to the PALM scheme and providing insights into how the scheme can be improved. The concepts outlined in this proposal have been developed in conjunction with industry to enhance the opportunities for workers and employers under the scheme.

Worker Support

NT Farmers and the industry recognizes that the remoteness of farms within the NT provides unique challenges and opportunities for visiting workers from Timor Leste. Simply employing workers is not enough to keep them engaged and productive in a job. Training opportunities, social programs, pastoral care provision and connectivity to family back home are also needed. Under the project NT Farmers proposes to implement:

In country training

The delivery of in country, pre departure job training to equip workers with the foundational skills to quickly contribute to Territory farms. This training will consist of Occupational Health and Safety basic English and financial literacy skills, tool handling, theoretical forklift and driving principles, basic financial literacy and essential picking and harvest skills.

The in-country training will complement and enhance the current pre departure programs in English and basic life skills so that participants can understand rates of pay and costs of accommodation/board etc. In addition, it will cover worker's rights and expected conditions of employment, it will also include information on social and pastoral care programs and connectivity with loved ones.

In country training is essential to appropriately prepare workers for life on farms; furthermore, it helps to improve farm safety through the delivery of critical safety information which many workers are not aware of.

In country training will also help to foster goodwill with Timor Leste through investment in local training providers and centers. The provision of predeparture training will stimulate the local economy and the development of a local training industry. It will also help to ensure workers and their families understand their rights and obligations while providing reassurance that their wellbeing is an important consideration.

On farm training

On farm training is essential to enable workers to enhance their qualifications and to apply newly acquired skills upon their return home. The training under this program provides an exceptional opportunity for workers to productively utilize their free time on farm by developing their career and life skills. This program provides workers access to training which they generally would not otherwise access on farm or in country due to the subsidized cost and delivery location.

Voluntary and merit based after-hours training in a range of subjects such as plant nutrition and pest and disease control, irrigation, forklift and tractor licensing and English will help to motivate workers to continue working on farms and it will provide them with valuable skills to apply in their current or future jobs. The training activities could be delivered in a group setting consisting of workers from several farms or it could be delivered online to each farm.

The final delivery method is dependent on numbers, training providers and the views of the workers.

NT Farmers appreciates the importance of participants returning home with new skills to improve their job prospects and apply these new skills in their own businesses/workplaces. Training and upskilling are also an important way to build positive relations between the Northern Territory and Timor Leste and to make seasonal work in the NT a career pathway for young Timorese interested in the agricultural sector.

NT Farmers have received support from training organizations to deliver education courses in Timor Leste and on farms. The program will provide workers with the opportunity to continue their studies and attain formal introductory to advanced qualifications in the agricultural field. Potential qualification pathways include certificates 1&2 in horticulture and agriculture.

It is important to note that NT Farmers Association intends to collaborate with the Timor Leste Agricultural Department along with workers themselves to identify the training needs and wants of Timor Leste workers to ensure that the training accessed is engaging and relevant to their career ambitions and the needs of the Timor Leste agricultural sector.

On farm training of workers aligns with NT Farmer's Association's long-term plans to develop agricultural extension and capacity building projects in Timor Leste. Territory farmers have expressed an interest to work with the Timor Leste Department of Agriculture and farming organisations to develop agricultural training centers and commercial projects to build farming skills in the country. In the future, pre departure workers could gain skills on these training farms and on returning they will be able to apply their new skills on farms and train other future workers. It is also hoped that this close collaboration will in the future lead to joint venture investments by NT producers in enterprises in Timor Leste.

Social activities

Farmers recognize that visiting workers need a range of recreational activities to maintain their mental health and well-being and to remain productive and engaged in the workplace. However, it can be difficult to relax on farms that are in remote locations. A key function of the support officers will be to help to coordinate social activities and pastoral care initiatives to allow workers to break the often monotonous nature of farm work. Events may include social sports events, on farm movie nights, excursions, BBQs, and events with religious/cultural groups.

NT Farmers will seek advice and assistance from the Timor Leste Consulate and local diaspora community groups and from our extensive community contacts to help implement social programs and events for workers. Although these activities do not have a skills development component, it is extremely important for the overall worker experience and for soft diplomacy between Australia and the home countries.

Connectivity

It is important to note that this program will require all participating farms to potentially upgrade their internet connectivity systems to allow workers access to high-speed internet. Workers rightly expect and need high quality internet connectivity to communicate with their family, for relaxation and through this pilot program to enhance their workplace skills. The delivery of training programs will depend on workers accessing training videos and courses via a high bandwidth internet connection.

Prior to farms receiving employees, project support officers will assess the internet quality on farms. Properties that do not have high quality internet connectivity will be required, if technically possible, to upgrade their systems before workers arrive. Support officers will provide general recommendations to farm managers on the potential solutions available to upgrade their internet systems.

Timor Leste

This pilot focusing on Timor Leste and the Northern Territory provides the unique opportunity to test the program on a small scale before it is potentially implemented nationally in Australia and with additional countries. Timor Leste is the perfect country to test the pilot with, it is extremely close geographically with the NT and our farmers already have close relationships with people in the country.

With several flights per week between Darwin and Dili, the Territory is perfectly suited to host the pilot project. Furthermore, the close proximity of the two countries, will enable workers to easily travel to and from Darwin under a multiple entry visa program.

The simplicity of travel between the two jurisdictions provides workers and industry with the flexibility to travel when required and at times that suit them.

The current program is not well suited to the unique nature of mango production, our major crop. Seasonal variations make it difficult for farmers to accurately forecast when and how many workers will be required for harvest until shortly before harvest begins. Under this program, pre trained workers will be able to rapidly travel directly to the Territory as needed. This will ensure minimal down time for workers and greater flexibility for growers.

Visa pathway

It is intended that this partnership program will operate within the PALM scheme. Currently the PALM scheme includes Timor Leste, under the proposed program only minimal modifications to the program will be required. The pilot will test the arrangements under the PALM scheme and explore opportunities to streamline the system for workers and farmers alike.

NT Farmers proposes that the pilot program run for three years, providing both farmers and workers with certainty and security and to enable benefits and issues to be identified. The pilot program has been designed to provide workers with the greatest flexibility and options in regard to how they spend their time in the program. If employees work for 304 hours in under eight weeks, they have the following options:

- The ability to return to Timor Leste for a rest period (farmers to fund transport to the airport and workers to fund flights).
- The ability to access free agricultural training programs during worker rest periods (in addition to access throughout their employment under the program).
- The option to continue working and receive overtime if requested by the employer.
- Remain in Australia until rest period has ended or until work is available.

The above-mentioned scenarios each have their unique advantages for workers. Some may elect to return home to see their family while others may want to continue to work or develop their skills in Australia. NT Farmers will negotiate with farmers to secure discounted accommodation for participants who decide to undertake training during their leave on farm.

Providing flexibility for Timor Leste workers achieves positive outcomes for both workers and farmers. Workers will have the autonomy to decide what work they would like to undertake, what additional skills they wish to acquire and when they want to work in the Territory. For farmers, it will enable them to access reliable, pre-trained and engaged workers throughout the year, many of whom have hopefully worked on their farm previously and upskilled their qualifications for mutual benefit.

PALM Modifications

Currently, a critical issue for Territory producers, especially the mango industry is the length of time and complexity involved for farmers to access workers under the PALM program. It can take several months for the Pacific Labour Facility to review and endorse Approved Employer paperwork to recruit workers.

NT Farmers suggest streamlining the paperwork obligations imposed on Approved Employers in regard to labour market testing in either of the following ways:

- Remove the labour market testing requirement

Evidence from the Northern Territory and feedback from industry demonstrates that the labour market is extremely tight within the agricultural sector. Years of market testing has consistently proven that there are simply not enough Australian workers applying for agricultural jobs. Removing the labour market testing requirement will significantly reduce the paperwork burden and processing times on farmers and the government.

- Allow NT Farmers Association to undertake labour market testing on behalf of farming approved employers.

NT Farmers Association as the Northern Territory's Harvest Trail Services Provider constantly advertises job positions and recruits for the industry. Job openings are listed by NT Farmers on the Harvest Trail website and on our own Jobs Board webpage. NT Farmers collects data regarding the number of applicants who apply for each position, their suitability and location.

Under this pilot project, NT Farmers proposes utilizing this data and submitting it to the PLS to satisfy labour market testing requirements. This arrangement takes the administrative pressure off industry while accurately demonstrating to the PLS the reality of the Territory labour market.

The process of undertaking and submitting recruitment plans needs to be enhanced to provide flexibility to farmers. The current system has not been designed for the agricultural industry which varies in its workforce needs each season. It is unrealistic to expect farmers to precisely forecast how many workers they require for a season and the length of time they will be employed.

A flexible pre-approval recruitment plan process must be established. It is proposed that recruitment plans from the previous year be accepted for upcoming harvests. The plans must have a flexibility clause built into it to allow for a potential 20% variation in workforce needs. This will provide farmers with the certainty to access a pool of workers that will suit their harvest needs. As the harvest nears and farmers get a better idea of harvest size, farmers will have the opportunity to revise the number of workers required.

The conditionally approved plans based on last season will reduce the administrative workload on farmers and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). If farmers know in advance that their workforce needs will be significantly different, they can advise the PLS by a predetermined cutoff date.

Accelerated depreciation

High quality on farm accommodation can significantly improve the worker experience and assist with worker retention. Unfortunately, due to the high costs of construction in the Northern Territory, many farms have struggled to upgrade their worker accommodation facilities.

When on farm accommodation is at capacity farmers often turn to commercial accommodation providers to house their workforce. However, accommodation is critically in short supply in the Northern Territory, especially in regional areas. The undersupply of accommodation is directly impacting upon the agricultural sector which often relies on hotel/motel/hostel accommodation for workers. The lack of quality accommodation combined with the extremely high cost of accommodation is resulting in farmers hiring less staff and therefore negatively impacting upon farmer profits.

Accessing commercial accommodation facilities provides a level of flexibility for farmers however, it places a strain on the relatively small and overstretched accommodation sector. The accelerated depreciation offset scheme for framers will alleviate the pressure on tourist accommodation and will have a positive flow on effect for the tourism industry.

NT Farmers Association proposes introducing a three year, 30% per annum accelerated tax depreciation incentive for new worker accommodation constructed under the pilot program. This will drive significant accommodation upgrades in the sector, and it will stimulate the local construction industry.

Accommodation upgrades will help employers meet PALM standards and it will make the northern industry more attractive for all agricultural workers. NT Farmers recommends that the program be made available on projects of up to a value of \$5 million.

The scheme will play an important role in future proofing accommodation for workers who travel to the Northern Territory. Upgrades will be built to the specifications of the PALM scheme to ensure that the buildings provide a high level of safety and comfort to workers. Furthermore, improved accommodation across the industry will assist to attract workers to the Territory for decades to come.

Accommodation plans

A large and time-consuming aspect for industry is completing accommodation plans and becoming audited under the PALM. Farmers, especially smaller agribusinesses, spend a large amount of resources in complying with and preparing accommodation plans.

An important role of the workforce support officers will be to assist producers to navigate the accommodation plan pathway and to audit worker accommodation. The officers will visit accommodation sites, take photos of the facilities, or perhaps even undertake a live stream tour with PLS. The officers will also provide guidance on how producers need to complete their plans.

Furthermore, once plans have been approved, the workforce support officers will undertake random spot audits of the accommodation sites on behalf of the PLS. This will deliver significant cost and time savings for the PLS, the agency will no longer have to send workers specifically to the region to undertake audits. It will also facilitate fast follow up inspections/audits as part of the accreditation process.

The workforce support officers will become the authoritative industry and PLS liaison to work through accommodation issues. Industry will significantly benefit from accessing a local representative who can provide relevant and timely advice.

Synergies

It is important to note that this program will not simply benefit participants from Timor Leste. It will also generate significant positive outcomes for farmers, other farm workers, the Australian and Timor Leste governments and help fast track agricultural development in Timor Leste

Australian farmers, but especially Northern Territory farmers, desperately need workers. The Territory has historically struggled to attract workers and COVID has only exacerbated this problem. Last year, roughly 30% of the mango crop was left unpicked due to workforce shortages, this results in higher food prices for consumers and lost income for the Northern Territory economy.

The Territory cannot afford to lose production due to the lack of a workforce. This lost production also represents a lost opportunity for substantial foreign exchange earnings for Timor Leste. A flexible, pre-trained and reliable workforce consisting of international and local workers is needed. This program will help to provide a market tested international workforce and ensure that the workers are looked after and benefit economically and professionally from farm work in the NT. This program will help provide Territory farmers with the business certainty that they will reap the rewards of their crops and the confidence to expand, potentially into Timor Leste.

Territory farmers want to develop long term relationships with Timorese workers. They see this program as an opportunity to provide long term employment opportunities for Timor Leste people and to offer workers continuous training and career pathways. It is envisioned that under this program the same workers will regularly return to Territory farms, season after season. This creates certainty to both workers and farmers; furthermore, workers will be able to expect the same high standard of work conditions.

Although this program is targeted at Timorese workers, it will have a positive effect on the domestic workforce. The program will provide opportunities for domestic and international workers to engage and develop connections with each other through its social program. Furthermore, the compliance checks that the project coordinators provide will help to ensure that all workers are treated with respect and fairness and benefit from safe farms that meet the highest workplace standards.

Figure 1



The Ag Worker Partnership Program has been built around meeting the needs of the Timorese workforce. The workforce is supported by four pillars that provide oversight to the project and skills development of workers contributing to Territory farms.

Budget

	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025
Workforce support officers	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$200,000
Worker skills development (\$675 education credit capped at 1000 workers)	\$675,000	\$675,000	\$675,000
Provision of worker events	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
Travel (intra Territory and to Timor Leste)	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
Communications (inclusive of translation services)	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$15,000
Project steering committee support	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Administration	\$96,000	\$96,000	\$96,000
Budget per annum	\$1,056,000	\$1,056,000	\$1,056,000
Total budget	\$3,168,000		

The project budget will deliver significant outcomes for the Northern Territory economy while simultaneously enhancing connections between the people of the Northern Territory and Timor Leste. Furthermore, the project will provide certainty to Territory agribusinesses that their crops will be harvested and sent to market. The agribusiness sector in the Territory employs hundreds of local workers throughout the year and contributes nearly half a billion dollars to the Territory/ economy.

NT Farmers have significant experience in delivering successful large multi-year projects on time and within budget. The project steering committee and the NT Farmers board will provide two layers of security and governance to the project. Furthermore, all NT Farmers' accounts are audited, and the organization will provide regular milestone updates on the project to funding providers.

