

Working on the harvest trail



Chair of the National Harvest Labour Working Group, Chris Gallus, getting first hand experience of harvest labour in Batlow, New South Wales.
Photo: Adelong and Tumut Times

The work is hard and it's seasonal. Hours spent in the hot sun, climbing up and down ladders, picking and hauling baskets of fruit and vegetables. Who would have the guts to do it? Four Members of the House of Representatives recently did as part of an investigation into harvest labour.

Earlier this year, Federal Members Chris Gallus (Hindmarsh, South Australia), Cameron Thompson (Blair, Queensland) and Alby Schultz (Hume, New South Wales), together with Employment Services Minister Tony Abbott, travelled to Batlow in New South Wales to experience for themselves what life on the harvest trail is like.

The verdict after picking and packing apples: "It's tough, but you feel good at the end of the day and you certainly sleep well," said Chris Gallus, chair of a National Harvest Labour Working Group.

As Federal Member for a metropolitan Adelaide electorate, Chris Gallus' connection with fruit and vegetable picking is not immediately obvious. But it originates from a 1997 parliamentary committee investigation into working holiday makers which she chaired for the Joint Standing Committee on Migration.

"The Migration Committee found that fruit and vegetable growers were increasingly relying on young people from overseas to bring in their harvest. The young people were visiting Australia as part of a working holiday," Mrs Gallus said. "We felt that more needed to be done to encourage Australians to take up employment opportunities in the horticultural industry."

'contract pickers can get up to \$200 a day'

In its 1997 report *Working Holiday Makers, More Than Tourists*, the Migration Committee concluded that the extensive use of working holiday makers in harvest work was a 'quick fix' rather than a longer term solution to the labour market needs of the horticultural industry. The Committee called for a cooperative approach between the horticultural industry and government in developing solutions to the industry's needs. Among its recommendations, the Migration Committee proposed a coordinated national strategy for harvest labour recruitment.

Chris Gallus was not content to leave the Migration Committee's work as just recommendations. Following the release of the Committee's report she wrote to the Prime Minister advocating the establishment of a working group that could follow up the Migration Committee's proposals. The matter was subsequently referred to Employment Services Minister Tony Abbott, who

established the National Harvest Labour Working Group with Mrs Gallus as its chair. Along with Federal Members Cameron Thompson, Alby Schultz and John Forrest (Mallee, Victoria), the working group includes horticultural industry representatives from various states.

The working group conducted a number of field visits to fruit and vegetable growing areas and held discussions with growers, pickers, hostel owners and transport companies. They have also spoken to people in more remote areas.

"The message from growers has been the same no matter where we have been," explained Mrs Gallus. "They are having real trouble in getting enough people to pick their fruit and vegetables."

"The difficulty is that many people assume that harvest work is only casual work for a few weeks in the year. In reality, there are different seasons for fruit and vegetables around Australia, which gives a de facto national harvest trail providing work for people throughout the year."

Mrs Gallus admits that one of the real problems is that people perceive that harvest work is too gruelling and does not pay well enough for the hard work. "People get discouraged if they think that they are going to work their guts out for little reward. But people don't realise that nowadays contract pickers can get up to \$200 a day."

As part of its investigation, the working group has identified some disincentives to harvest work that need to be addressed by the horticultural industry and the communities that the industry supports. These include a lack of coordinated information about available harvest work and a lack of affordable short-term accommodation.

"When we went picking in Batlow," commented Mrs Gallus, "all the nearby hostels were full so we had to find accommodation in Gundagai, about one hour's drive away."

Mrs Gallus also identified the problem of pickers being seen as itinerants who do not really belong.

"When we visited Shepparton, I was really pleased to see a sign that said Fruit Pickers Welcome. In some other places, we got the impression that people were less inviting."

The working group's proposals will be considered by the Employment Services Minister. Among the likely outcomes could be the recognition of a national harvest trail and better promotion of harvest work availability.

As for the rewards that the Members themselves gained from their days in the field, Mrs Gallus said: "We donated our fruit picking earnings to charity."