80 per cent of peak harvest labour. Backpackers and the Working Holiday Maker visa

November 2026

Australian Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke came in for a drubbing earlier this month for announcing new regulations for Working Holiday Maker (WHM) visas. There were strong criticisms from sectors that rely on WHM labour - the agriculture, tourism and hospitality industries. In this article I want to look at the WHM visas, the role WHMs play in the agricultural sector, economic consequences of changes to the visa system, criticism of the proposed changes, and the government's response.

According to the National Farmers Federation (NFF):

- Working Holiday Makers make up around 14 per cent of all farm worker jobs and are especially important during peak demand periods, including around 44 per cent of the horticulture workforce, 31 per cent of grains, 26 per cent of red meat and 25 per cent of cotton workers
- They can supply up to 80 per cent of peak harvest labour in fresh produce
- About 52,000 Working Holiday Makers work in horticulture each year
- They are expected to spend $4.68 billion annually in the Australian economy, including about $726 million directly in regional communities
- Deloitte Access Economics has estimated the absence of Working Holiday Makers from horticulture would cost the industry $6.3 billion, put 127,000 supply-chain jobs at risk and reduce GDP by $13 billion. [1]

The Working Holiday Maker (WHM) visas

The WHM visa has operated since 1975. 'In the 2025 – 2026 financial year,' reports the Conversation, 'more than 323,000 backpackers from more than 40 countries were granted a Working Holiday Maker visa. That's well up on pre-COVID levels, when it was between 210,000-250,000 a year from 2011 to 2019'.[2]

Across the country, agriculture as a whole employs more than 250,000 workers each year according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Figures from the 2021 census showed people from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds made up 13 per cent of the agricultural workforce.

First Working Holiday Maker visa

There are three visas under which WHMs live and work in Australia.

Under the First Working Holiday Maker visa a successful applicant can stay in Australia for 12 months. It costs AUD840.00

With this visa the successful applicant can:

- do short-term work in Australia to help pay for their holiday
- study for up to 4 months
- travel to and from Australia as many times as they want

[1] NFF Slams Visa Slowdown 17 SouthBurnett September 2926

[2] 'I want a visa, so I have to do farm work': how new visa rules will hit regional Australia., The Conversation September 2026

- do 3 months (88 days) of specified work to become eligible for a second Working Holiday visa

These are the industries and areas are approved for specified work:

- tourism and hospitality in Northern or Remote and Very Remote Australia, from 22 June 2021
- plant and animal cultivation in regional Australia
- fishing and pearling in regional Australia
- tree farming and felling in regional Australia
- mining in regional Australia
- construction in regional Australia
- bushfire recovery work in declared bushfire-affected areas carried out after 31 July 2019
- recovery work in flood, cyclone, or other severe weather-affected areas carried out after 31 December 2021
- critical COVID-19 work in the healthcare and medical sectors anywhere in Australia, after 31 January 2020

It is the plant cultivation in regional Australia with which this article is concerned.
Work here includes:

- picking fruits on an orchard
- cultivating or propagating plants, fungi or their products or parts
- immediate processing of plant products

Second Working Holiday Maker visa (subclass 463)
With this visa the successful applicant can stay 12 months in Australia. It costs AUD1,000.
The applicant must have a first WHM visa.

With the second WHM visa the applicant can do the same things as for a first WHM visa:

- do short- term work in Australia to help pay for their holiday
- study for up to 4 months
- travel to and from Australia as many times as they want

To get the second WHM visa applicants must have done at least 3 months – 88 days – of specified work as defined above.

Second WHM visa holders must do 6 months – or at least 179 calendar days - of specified work to become eligible for a third WHM visa.

The Third Working Holiday Maker visa
With this visa the successful applicant can stay a further 12 months in Australia. It costs AUD1,000.

Applicants can do the same work as listed above.

British backpackers

British backpackers through a sweetheart deal between the British Government and the Australian Government have no requirement to work in regional areas.

What do Backpackers do in plant cultivation?

Backpackers' principal work in plant cultivation is seasonal harvesting.

We're reliant on those workers that are just looking for those short windows of work [...] the visa helps with that. Backpackers make up our main labour source for harvest work.[3]

Backpackers are notably useful because they meet the need for flexibility in growers' workforces.

You may have periods where you need quite a lot more workers than other periods ... we need those backpackers to assist with surge capacity and be a complement to the existing PALM[4] *workers*.[5]

The wide array of crops, production systems and major variations in the size and scale of commercial vegetable producers across the country, means the vegetable industry needs flexible and diverse workforce options.[6]

For smaller farms, particularly the family-run stuff ... they can't guarantee the seasonal work is there year-round, and that's where the backpackers have filled those shortage ... it's also not feasible to rely on an Australian workforce. We don't have enough people living in regional and rural Australia to do all that work.[7]

The proposed changes

Under Home Affairs Minister Tony Bourke's proposed changes those with a First WHM need to work 120 days in regional or remote parts of Australia to seek a Second WHM visa. Currently they only need to do 88 hours.

Those seeking a Second Year WHM will have to enter a ballot, with the number of places capped at 45,000, down from the 57,000 who qualified this year.

For those seeking a Third WHM also would be subject to a ballot, with the number of places to be capped at 5,000, down from 31,000 this year.

Visa approval time slowdown

In July the Government introduced a temporary reduction in visa processing to limit international arrivals.

If approvals continue at the same rate, approximately 177,876 working holiday-makers would receive visas during the current financial year. That would represent a dramatic reduction compared with the previous financial year, when Australia granted a record 323,077 backpacker visas.[8]

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[3] The Conversation ... 22 September 2026

[4] Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.

[5] Johnson, Sophie, D'souza, Jessica, Tindall, Brooke ,Ikenasio, Lua Ikenasio and Bohane, Farmers fear Working Holiday Maker visa changes will cause worker shortages and food insecurity

[6] Concerns grow over visa changes, The Express 29 September 2026

[7] Johnson et.al. ... 2026

[8] Haugsted, Nicola, Australia announces major changes to new policy after fierce backlash from businesses 2026

Impact of the WHM policy

This is a low blow for farmers and the businesses that produce Australia's food and fibre.[9]

It's hard enough getting staff now in regional areas. ... It's going to be millions of dollars for the grains industry operations to counteract a decision that's been made in Canberra for whatever reason.[10]

Visa approval delays
There is concern that people are already waiting three to four months foe visa approval just at the time that harvesting is beginning.[11]

Since the beginning of July, just 44,469 backpacker visas have been approved. If approvals continue at the same rate, approximately 177,876 working holiday-makers would receive visas during the current financial year. That would represent a dramatic reduction compared with the previous financial year, when Australia granted a record 323,077 backpacker visas.[12]

The ballot
The ballot has been universally criticised.

Expecting backpackers to work in tough conditions in the bush for months, only to be entered into a ballot with uncertain results, is a gamble not just for those backpackers, but for regional Australia.[13]

(Backpackers) might just stay in the capital cities and enjoy what they want to enjoy in shorter stays in Australia.[14]

Food wastage
There are concerns that the new rules will deter backpackers from seeking a second and third visa and jeopardise harvests.

... workforce shortages could lead to wasted crops. For some growers [fewer workers] might mean that they have to finish their season early, it may mean that they can't get their crops picked in time. For smaller farms, particularly the family-run stuff ... they can't guarantee the seasonal work is there year-round, and that's where the backpackers have filled those shortages." [15]

Impact on the wider community:

Without (backpackers) our food wouldn't get picked, our potatoes would sit in the ground [...] The pubs would be empty, the supermarkets bare. They're part of our community.[16]

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[9] NFF Slams Visa Slowdown 17 SouthBurnett September 2926
[10] Oates, Petra, Baker, Jess , Maloney, Rosanne and Tomlin, Sam, Government's backpacker visa backdown sparks mixed reactions across regional Australia, 18 November 2026
[11] Johnson et al ... 2026
[12] Haugsted ... 2060
[13] Conversation ... 2026
[14] Express et.al.2060
[15] Johnson, et al ... 2026
[16] Conversation ... 2026

Senator McDonald, Shadow Minister for Resources and Northern Australia, said:

The effects of cutting immigration numbers from a sector that contributed so much to the economy would be widespread.[17]

"I've met a lot of (backpackers) who have never left Griffith. They get a lot of multiculturalism from us; they get a different view of what's out there. We bring our home here, then we make Griffith our home[18].

Backpacker responses
"I think 88 days for a second year is fair, but more than 100 is more sacrifice. Especially with the regional jobs we do here. These are hard jobs to do. ... We also want to travel more ... Australia is a huge country, so if we have to give more days in a regional place, it's [harder] to get more of Australia.[19]

It's like a lottery system ... why waste the time doing it if the chance is so low?[20]

WHM policy changes in response to universal criticism

Within a week of putting forward the changes to the WHM system Minister Burke and the Labor government did one of the biggest policy backflips of their term of office.

The number of months an applicant for a second WHM visa had have to have worked was brought back to 3 months - 88 days.

The ballot was put off until next year when it will undoubtedly be condemned again.

Perhaps the most significant change is that the number of third WHM places was increased to 25,000 annually.

The Australian Government will have talks with the British Government about bringing British backpacker conditions into line with the conditions for backpackers from any other country.

[17] The Express ... 2028

[18] ABC News ... 2026

[19] Oates Petra et.al. ...2026

[20] Backpackers say visa changes make regional work less attractive, ABC News 24 October 2026