



By Liam O'Callaghan

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## Australian industry calls for visa relief



Australia's fresh produce growers do not want to lose access to foreign workers because of the coronavirus outbreak

**I**ndustry bodies from right across Australia's horticultural sector have called on the Federal government to extend the visas of foreign workers in the midst of the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak.

Ausveg, the Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) and Citrus Australia (CA) are among the bodies that have spoken out.

They all contend that foreign workers are vital to the supply of fresh fruit and vegetables to Australian consumers.

The key programmes the bodies want the Federal government to address are the Seasonal Workers Program, the Pacific Labour Scheme and the Working Holiday Makers Programme.

Tyson Cattle, national manager – public affairs of Ausveg, said growers need this workforce to ensure their produce will reach Australian consumers.

"Growers would love to employ a local

workforce, but the reality is that our industry relies on international workers through the various visa programs – they are a vital source of labour for our industry," Cattle said.

"The extension of Seasonal Worker Program and Working Holiday Maker visas is a much-needed short-term solution to what will become a larger problem as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic continues to limit the number of foreign workers who can come to Australia."

Michael Rogers, chief executive of AFPA, concurred, urging the Australian government to act quickly.

"If we do not secure these extensions workers will need to return to their home countries and there will not be the required workers to harvest a large number of fruit and vegetable crops meaning Australians will not have access to healthy and nutritious fresh produce at this unprecedented time," said Rogers.

Nathan Hancock, chief executive of Citrus Australia, told ABC's Victorian Country Hour up to 750,000 tonnes of citrus will need to be picked between April and October.

"They're going to have to extend these visas anyway so let's get on with it and keep in mind what they can do while they're here and give them the opportunity to work in rural and regional Australia where they are needed," said Hancock.

In addition to foreign workers, all of the bodies said any local workers who had affected by the outbreak were more than welcome in the horticulture industry.

"Industry also welcomes local workers who are willing and able to work on farms and who may be interested in working in horticulture due to the current economic situation," said Cattle.