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By Matthew Jones

Tuesday 3rd August 2021, 1:37 GMT

Labour relief for NZ growers

Government agrees to streamline entry process for RSE workers



Credit: NZ Kiwifruit Growers

Industry groups have welcomed the New Zealand government's move to streamline the entry process for Pacific Island seasonal workers.

Announced on Monday (2 August), the arrangement will allow one-way quarantine-free travel for Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) workers from Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.

HortNZ chief executive, Nadine Tunley, said the decision would alleviate pressure on New Zealand's horticulture industry, which has contended with an "extreme seasonal labour crisis" for harvest and pruning.

"While Kiwis will continue to be first priority for employment in our horticulture and wine industries, we still require additional help from our seasonal workforce, particularly during such challenging economic times," said Tunley.

Industry bodies NZ Apples & Pears (NZAPI), NZ Kiwifruit Growers, Summerfruit NZ, Wine NZ, NZ and HortNZ are working with the federal government to finalise conditions of the

agreement. It is hoped workers will be able to arrive from September.

Alan Pollard, chief executive NZAPI, said this week's announcement was the result of many months of negotiations between industry and government.

"We have long argued that, with the Pacific Islands largely Covid-free, the idea of restricting worker movement to MIQ (managed isolation and quarantine) capacity has never made sense," said Pollard.

"We fully understand why a bubble with Australia has taken preference, with New Zealanders wanting to reunite with their families and loved ones. But quarantine free travel providing the much-needed labour force to support our industries through pruning, thinning and harvest has taken on greater urgency."

Pollard said almost 3m cartons of export-grade apples and pears were lost over the 2021 harvest as a result of the labour shortage.

With a much larger crop expected for the 2022 harvest, Pollard said a different approach to accessing seasonal workers was required.

"Growers across the country have been telling us that they cannot survive another season like 2021," he explained.

"This announcement shows that the government has also been concerned about the financial viability of the horticulture and viticulture sectors, and our ability to generate much needed export receipts and to protect the security of food supply for New Zealand consumers.

"They have listened to us, and together with us have come up with a viable alternative that satisfies both health and economic priorities."

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