

# Pilot program supports CaLD workers to settle into Gippsland

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National Vegetable  
Extension Network

VICTORIA - GIPPSLAND

## Introduction

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) workers are essential to the vegetable industry in Gippsland, from European backpackers to workers from the Pacific Islands, Thailand and Vietnam. Many businesses employ CaLD workers in their harvest, weeding, planting, picking and packing operations. Supporting CaLD workers to integrate into our communities and feel welcome and safe in Gippsland is crucial not only for the workers, but the growers and wider community as well.

VegNET Gippsland, through Food and Fibre Gippsland, delivered the Informed and Supported Workers (ISW) Program funded by Agriculture Victoria from July 2022 to September 2023. This pilot program aimed to deliver targeted support to organisations that assist CaLD workers so they could undertake collaborative activities that strengthen Victoria's horticulture workforce.

The ISW Program provided training and skills development, employment and pastoral support, promoted COVID-safe behaviours and built cultural competency to assist CaLD workers and their employers across Gippsland.

The ISW Program aligned strongly with VegNET Gippsland's priority area to build business capacity and a sustainable workforce in the region, including increased and more accessible support for CaLD workers.

The ISW Program highlighted some gaps and challenges for CaLD workers; however, it also identified the needs of CaLD workers in Gippsland, the stakeholders working within this area and the activities that had the most benefit to the workers, growers and the community.

## Tailored program activities

To better understand the needs of CaLD workers and their employers across Gippsland, comprehensive consultation was undertaken with growers, labour hire companies, industry stakeholders, accommodation providers, health care workers, religious leaders and government bodies at the start of the program.

While the ISW Program considered many elements impacting CaLD workers, from COVID-19 to health, diet and nutrition, the following four areas became the primary focus of the Program: worker road safety; communication; CaLD stakeholders; and cultural diversity.

### 1. Worker Road Safety

Throughout the ISW Program, it became clear that there were some serious concerns associated with the safety of CaLD workers, particularly with respect to alcohol, drink-driving, and road safety. Through discussions with community groups and employers, it was understood that issues relating to alcohol consumption can generally be linked to homesickness, emotional stress, boredom, and isolation. While road safety problems are more commonly linked to a poor understanding of State and National road rules.

## Key messages

- ▶ The Informed and Supported Workers (ISW) pilot program, funded by Agriculture Victoria and delivered by VegNET Gippsland through Food and Fibre Gippsland, aimed to help seasonal workers effectively transition into work and life in Gippsland.
- ▶ The program connected stakeholders working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities, shared useful resources, held events and training sessions, and used targeted communication approaches to build the cultural competency of CaLD workers and their employers across Gippsland.
- ▶ While there are ongoing challenges to overcome, the program paved the way for a more informed and supported CaLD community in Gippsland and encouraged similar initiatives in other areas of Australia.

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To help CALD workers better understand the safety issues associated with road safety and drink-driving in Australia, through collaboration with Pacific Labour Facility, the ISW Program was able to fund and facilitate over 30 workers to participate in a Safe Driver Training Course. The course included the use of virtual reality goggles showing the effects of drink driving, a practical driving session and a theory component.

The safe driver training came with its own challenges, with employers noting that some elements of the theory content of the course were too complex for a seasonal worker with minimal English comprehension. It was recommended by an employer that any future courses include prior consultation with employers/industry about how to structure and deliver the content to ensure the best possible outcome. It was also noted that for many of the workers their attention span only lasts about 2 hours due to language barriers, and that making the content as practical and visual as possible is best. This kind of feedback from employers is key to providing the best possible support and education to the workers.

Further to this, the local Police were very helpful and actively engaged in providing ongoing assistance with respect to alcohol and road rules through attendance and presentations at regular meetings held by two of the local labour hire companies. While this has its own challenges with respect to translation, cultural differences, and fear, it was commented by one employer that the Police “spoke very constructively with the workers about the issues of driving”. It was also noted that repetitive integration can help to develop trust and understanding between the workers and the police to allow for an ongoing successful relationship and effective education program. Following the feedback from the safe driver training courses, these sessions were kept quite short, and as oral, visual, and interactive as possible.

## 2. Communication

A monthly e-newsletter was established early in the Program and sent to over 170 horticulture employers and stakeholders across Gippsland to help promote the needs of CaLD workers, share relevant resources for growers and workers, and provide information on the courses being offered by the ISW Program. This e-newsletter leveraged the existing VegNET contact list, and grower and industry stakeholder relationships to ensure that as many of the key Gippsland horticultural employers were informed about the ISW Program as possible.

As previously mentioned, an ongoing challenge is language differences being a key barrier to effective communication with CaLD workforces and a limiting factor for workers to feel comfortable integrating into Australian society. Many CaLD workers in Gippsland speak limited English and have minimal reading and writing skills in their own language, never mind in English. For many CaLD workers there is a heavy reliance, both socially and in the workplace, on the few people in each cohort that can speak better English to share information, communicate and translate for other workers. A member of the Community Connections group who engages closely with the workers themselves commented that the Pacific Island workers are fundamentally oral people, and that effective communication should always be oral.

To help workers improve their English skills and feel more comfortable and confident to communicate and interact with others in the broader community, AMES Australia and the ISW Program facilitated in-person oral English lessons



*Nino Cipriani from AMES Australia teaching CaLD workers basic English to help improve their confidence.*



*CaLD workers learning English with Nino Cipriani from AMES Australia.*

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for over 35 seasonal horticultural workers across Gippsland. The employers who enrolled their workers to participate in these English lessons believed them to be very beneficial and reflected on the increased confidence of their workers to attempt to use English and to interact with the local community. The course also touched on digital safety with respect to scam messages that the workers may receive via text, phone call, email or online. With real examples provided, the workers were able to better understand what to look out for and how best to determine if a message is legitimate.

AMES Australia also tailored each English lesson to capture key areas of communication concern identified by the growers, such as farm safety and personal hygiene. The workers who participated in the training were also provided with links to further their English training online in their own time following the completion of the in-person training.

### 3. CaLD Stakeholders

The ISW Program established there was significant depth and breadth to the organisations and groups providing assistance to CaLD workers across Gippsland, and wider Victoria. While this is very positive there also seems to be a level of disconnectedness and a lack of integration across these organisations and groups.

Many groups and organisations have developed translated and video resources however it seemed that the value of these resource was minimal. It was evident that many stakeholders do not know these resources exist, never mind the workers themselves being able to have access to and benefit from them. One central location or organisation that brings everyone working within the CaLD community together to make connections, share resources and help the workers would be of great value. A unifying online presence would also help to easily identify the large number of stakeholders that work with CaLD workers, from community groups and government organisations to banks and health funds. Knowing who these stakeholders are would assist in streamlining and increasing the assistance available to workers and employers.

Furthermore, while there are many great websites with resources for the workers, such as the PALM and WorkSafe websites, along with the ISW webpage developed as part of the Program, these websites are not easily found or navigated by the workers. Many employers identified the workers as being very visual learners, with one employer commenting that visual and video resources have a valuable impact, with workers learning more from visual experiences

than they do from reading or writing. Social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have been identified as the main websites that workers visit during their free time.

Access to online resources has been questioned as a challenge for the workers however, this seems to be an obstacle that is becoming smaller as most workers purchase mobile phones during their time in Gippsland. WhatsApp is the primary platform used by the workers to communicate with home and their employers, so this is also a catalyst to ensure workers have a mobile device. Data costs can be a further issue however, free wi-fi is often provided in the workers' accommodation buildings.

### 4. Cultural Diversity

Many of the ISW Program's activities focused on directly helping the workers themselves to feel more comfortable. Employers also play a big role in creating a welcoming experience for the workers. Two 3-hour seminars were delivered by AMES Australia on 'Cultural Diversity and Managing a Culturally Diverse Team' with a total of 19 growers and community health workers attending the events. When asked 'On a scale of 1 to 10, what level of new knowledge and skills did you gain from this event?' participants responded with an average score of 7. A similar average score of 7 was recorded when asked if the participants' awareness of the topic had increased following the event. Participants were also asked if they would likely change farm practices or advice following the cultural diversity sessions, with over 76% of the participants saying they would by doing things such as celebrating cultural backgrounds, getting involved with workers' culture, education, and using more pictures for work instructions.



*"What does culture mean to you?" Participants at the Cultural Diversity Information Session holding up their drawings of what culture means to them*

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## Improving grower productivity, profitability, preparedness and competitiveness

Through the ISW Program, particularly the information sessions, training events and newsletter, more employers and stakeholders have been made aware of the challenges CaLD workers experience when they come to work in horticulture businesses and through simple, unified steps we can help to improve the experience for both workers and employers alike.

The Safe Driver Training Courses were a success, with one employer stating that they “had very good feedback from the workers and believe that everyone took away some new knowledge and skills,” while another observed that it was “really valuable to have our drivers more aware of the risks of driving tired or intoxicated.”

Employers and labour hire companies working with CaLD workers would benefit from connecting with their local police and establishing a regular oral and visual program educating workers on road safety, drink-driving and alcohol. This would come at minimal cost and be beneficial for workers, employers and the wider community as a whole with respect to safety on our roads. While a more substantial cost to continue, the labour hire companies and employers who had workers that participated in the safe driver training stated that they would likely hold similar events in the future due to the success of the initial courses. The local police have also identified that road safety incidents involving CaLD workers in the local area have decreased following the driver training and education sessions.

Events such as the PALM Regional Accelerator Forum and the Gippsland Round Table highlighted and promoted the need for collaboration to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goals, rather than working individually and having split resources. With one participant commenting that “we are all here for the same thing, for the workers.”

While in-person English lessons for large numbers of workers is not necessarily a cheap exercise, it was demonstrated to be very valuable for the individual workers who participated, and something employers should consider, particularly for workers they wish to have back in their businesses for several seasons. One employer in Gippsland has been utilising their local Neighbourhood House to provide workers with English lessons and have established an ongoing program due to the noticeable benefits of the program.

Through VegNET Gippsland, the rollout of the ISW program has triggered other growing regions across Australia to consider the needs of their CaLD workforce more closely.

## Next steps

While the ISW Program has wrapped up, the following recommendations were identified to ensure CaLD workers can enjoy their work and life in Gippsland. They include:

- ▶ Continue ongoing support and education from the police and health care professionals. The ISW Program identified serious concerns associated with the safety of CaLD workers, particularly with respect to alcohol, drink-driving and health issues. While this has its own challenges with effective translation, cultural differences and fear, repetitive integration can allow for a successful relationship and effective education.
- ▶ Develop a shared website for the CaLD community. A central website which can be accessed by CaLD workers, growers and stakeholders such as government organisations, community groups and service providers would help to make connections, share resources and streamline activities. As translated and video resources can be costly to develop, knowing what already exists through the website will ensure that funding is invested in appropriate resources.
- ▶ Use social media platforms to better communicate with CaLD workers. Many employers recognise that CaLD workers are visual learners, with one employer commenting that “visual/video resources have a valuable impact, with workers learning more from visual experiences than they do from reading or writing”. A dedicated YouTube channel and/or Facebook page for CaLD workers could share visual resources that are easy to access, use and understand. Most workers purchase a mobile phone during their time in Gippsland and often use WhatsApp to communicate.
- ▶ Don't underestimate the ‘culture shock’ for many CaLD workers. One grower acknowledged the vast differences they experienced when travelling to a Pacific Island nation, from road rules and vehicle safety to food, clothing and technology. Something as simple as being prepared for a Victorian winter can make a big difference to the experience of CaLD workers in Australia.

## Further information and resources

Contact VegNET Gippsland Regional Development Officer Emily Scott at [emily.scott@foodandfibregippsland.com.au](mailto:emily.scott@foodandfibregippsland.com.au) or 0455 214 102.

- ▶ [Informed and Supported Workers \(ISW\) website – Food and Fibre Gippsland](#)