

New visa would give farmers the helping hands they need



■ Dale Park

As farming businesses in WA prepare for the future and look to improve efficiency, it is important there are minimal hurdles.

Among the red tape and sustainability issues facing farmers, one which WAFarmers is focusing on is ensuring farms can be staffed with appropriately trained workers when they are needed.

What farmers need is seasonal workers for six to eight weeks at a time, two times a year.

But more than that, they need people with the right skills.

Driving big machinery

working with stock,

understanding the conditions on properties and in rural areas — these skills can take up to two

months to learn.

There are also other skills people may not realise you need to safely and effectively work on rural properties, such as the ability to drive on gravel roads, which can be a difficult skill to master.

What's more is it can take a lengthy period of time to understand the particularities of each property.

With the present system, farmers rely mainly on backpackers on 417 visas and 457 visa holders to fill these positions.

A lot of travellers do take up the opportunity to work on a farm because it means they can get an extension of 12 months to their visas — an attractive incentive.

However, once these people have been trained as employees and spent their time on the farm, they are not allowed to return again the next

year, meaning farmers have to train people year in year out. This is an inefficient and costly system.

WAFarmers would like to see a new visa class created for short-term agricultural workers, allowing them to return as often as they like for seasonal periods and bring their skills and knowledge of particular properties back with them.

We would also like to see the recognition of skills earned on farm, enabling workers to return and work on other properties if necessary, ensuring the efficient nature of such a system is shared among the community.

The response of most people would be to ask farmers why they do not employ local people first. The simple fact is with declining margins, farmers cannot afford to employ people on a full-time basis, and with

most Australians looking for full-time permanent work, they are not prepared to move to regional or rural areas because of the lack of job opportunities for spouses and limited childcare or education facilities.

Last month, WAFarmers broached the subject with Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce during his visit to Perth. He was understanding of the situation and welcomed our solutions, which will also be included in the WAFarmers submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper.

As we look to the future of agriculture in this State, WAFarmers wants to ensure any barriers to increasing viability and sustainability are removed in the economic interests of farmers and the rest of WA.

■ Dale Park is chief executive of WAFarmers