

Industry body Berries Australia has welcomed the extension of the skilled visa program but says the government needs to go further to address the underlying farm labor shortage.

The change involves moving most agricultural occupations from the short-term list to the regional occupations list which makes visa holders eligible for a four-year visa, double the current term.

Executive director of Berries Australia, Rachel Mackenzie, said that growers in many regions welcomed this decision as the two year turn over for their more senior staff resulted in significant disruption to their businesses.

“However, the government decision only covers skilled occupations and not unskilled labour such as fruit-picking. A new Agriculture Visa or improved Pacific Seasonal Workers program would address farm labour shortages by allowing farmers to hire a dedicated overseas workforce on a temporary basis,” said Mackenzie.

The US\$1.4 billion berry category is now the single largest fresh produce category in Australia and consumption is increasing across the county. To continue to grow, the berry industry needs access to reliable workers and this announcement will go some way toward meeting these needs.

“Berries Australia is committed to ensuring that growers can access an effective workforce to meet their needs, as part of that we are keen to look at ways to increase the number of Australians employed on farm,” Mackenzie said.

“It may seem counter-intuitive but being able to access the skills we need from overseas means that berry businesses can be more profitable and in turn, employ more locals.”