



## **Consultation for the 2025 Core Skill Occupation List (CSOL)**

### **Submission to Jobs and Skills Australia**

#### **Primary Industries Skills Council**

##### **Background**

The Primary Industries Skills Council is an Industry Skills Council operating principally from South Australia. The Council was formed in 2004 as a result of a merger of two former ITAB's, the Agriculture and Horticulture Industry Training Council and Seafood Training SA.

The Council operates as a voluntary organisation with a network of Directors and support personnel who provide regular input into assessing the labour and skill needs of the Primary Industries sector and the efficiency of current skill and migration programs in meeting those needs.

The Council is active on a number of fronts including working closely with Primary Industry employers, Peak Bodies and sector associations, recruitment companies and the Migration Institute of Australia.

The Council is regularly assessing the skill needs of the sector, the impact of Australia's changing demographic, especially in regard to regional areas, the relevance and need for migrant labour at all skill levels and the impact of AgTech on the sector. We are assisted in these tasks by regular contact with two key bodies, the National Farmers Federation and Ausveg National.

Over the past twenty years the Council has provided a large number of submissions to the South Australian and Commonwealth Governments on a range of issues including reforms to the ANZSIC and ANZSCO systems, Reforms to the current VET and Higher Education systems and a number of papers regarding Australia's Skilled Migration model.

This submission deals specifically with JSA's assessment of demand for specific occupations within the Primary Industries sector and the need for these occupations to be considered in the CSOL for the purpose of ensuring an efficient and effective Skills in Demand Visa model within the context of the broader Migration Strategy.

##### **Core Issues relating to identifying demand occupations in the Primary Industries sector.**

Assessing labour and skill demand in the Primary Industries sector is not an easy task as the sector has some unique labour arrangements.

The first point of difference is the acknowledged high standard error rates within ABS data due to such factors as seasonality, ill-defined job roles and composite job roles. There are numerous instances of businesses operating across diverse industry sectors such as broad acre farming and marine aquaculture with operatives identifying as a single occupation such as farmer in one sector only.



The industry is regionally based often in low population areas and especially in remote regions. This means that there are few or no people available to work in the industry. Sadly ABS data shows a continuing trend of loss of young people from regional areas to major urban centres.

Added to this is the informal recruitment pattern which in many instances cannot be identified through mainstream recruitment channels such as SEEK.com. The majority of farmers do not use SEEK.com. and continue to rely on informal “word of mouth” recruitment models. This may have worked in past decades but with a rapidly ageing regional population and proportionately smaller youth cohorts available, potential workers are simply not available.

It is important to note that Australia is experiencing a serious demographic problem due to 50 years of fertility rates below the replacement rate of 2.1. This has dramatically reduced the number of young people in the economy at a time of rapid ageing. This is especially impacting upon regional communities.

Although much of the sector is scaling up due to farmer retirements and the introduction of autonomous systems, there remain significant labour gaps which are threatening the viability of a large number of businesses across the Agrifood sector. Unless these are addressed, Australia will almost certainly see food insecurity within 5-10 years with much higher food prices.

It is no surprise that there is insufficient data on many primary industry occupations, however, industry sector bodies are well placed to provide a reliable commentary on skill shortages. As recently as last week, Ausveg released their Vegetable Industry Sentiment Report which outlined that 40% of growers are considering leaving the industry in the next 12 months. More importantly, 60% of growers indicated they were experiencing workforce shortages. 64% expect that workforce shortages will remain the same whilst 33% believe they will worsen.

It is concerning that workforce shortages in the vegetable industry are being experienced across full-time, part-time and casual positions, and across a spectrum of skilled, semi-skilled and low-skilled roles.

In the Seafood sector, the larger fishing fleets and the largest marine aquaculture farms (Tuna and Kingfish) are experiencing persistent and long term shortages of personnel especially Vessel Masters, Coxswains and Marine Engineers. In addition to these key personnel, in the past three years shortages of deck crew have also resulted in many vessels being tied up rather than going to sea.

In the broad acre sector there have been persistent shortages of farm managers and overseers. In specialist sectors such as Cattle, Dairy and Pigs, we have seen prolonged skilled labour shortages and increasing difficulty securing a range of key farm workers.

Whilst all these sectors have to some extent survived due to temporary migrant labour fulfilling a wide range of job roles (PALM workers, WHM Visa holders, International students etc) the lack of surety of skilled workers being available for individual businesses has resulted in many of these businesses choosing not to expand their operations and in some instances downsizing their operations in line with available labour. This is potentially catastrophic for maintaining food security for an Australian population that will grow from 27 million to around 36 million by 2050.

In assessing skill demand across the primary industries sector, we also need to understand that there are significant labour variations between the States. This is due to different industries in different states and Territories mostly related to climate variation. There is no cotton industry in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia. Similarly, there is no Bluefin Tuna industry in Queensland due to warmer waters.

Added to these locality variations are differing levels of investment in technology. South Australia has the largest and most advanced protected cropping sector including the largest advanced hydroponic farm with 43 hectares of giant glasshouses. The sheer number of workers classified as Crop Care Technicians runs into several thousand in South Australia alone.



Each State and Territory has unique primary industry sectors with differing demand levels and in many cases differing terminology. Despite the new OSCA model being viewed as an improved ANZSCO series, there are still key omissions such as Cold Store Manager, which is an important occupation across all perishable food sectors.

The pace of adoption of Ag Tech is in many ways a natural response to a lack of workers. Recent investments in product sorting technologies that scan and sort produce from oysters to potatoes have reduced the need for some picker/packer roles but created a new class of technician operators.

In a rapid and continuous change environment it is essential that there be annual reviews of occupation and industry classifications and occupational and skill adjustments conducted within each State and Territory with peak industry bodies to gain a more accurate assessment of current and future skill demand.

This would provide not only key information on actual skill shortages but result in the provision of State/Territory demand numbers as well as important locality demand for effective deployment of skilled migrant labour.

Currently the Primary Industry sector is very much the poor relation when it comes to assessment of skilled occupation demand. This is evidenced by the large number of primary industry occupations that JSA has insufficient data on.

Although the current review is a national assessment of demand, the variations between the States in each industry sector must be understood. Nationally aggregated figures can skew the data into lower national demand numbers whilst ignoring high demand numbers in specific States and Territories (e.g. Cotton/Tuna).

In terms of methodology, the more reliable demand numbers for the Primary Industries sector can be provided by peak industry bodies and sector bodies. SEEK.com is viewed as a highly unreliable source of skill demand and should not be used to assess demand for Primary occupations.

Indicative shortages are already listed in Labour Agreements that are agreements between the Commonwealth Government and various Industries listing key shortage occupations in each sector for migration. There are 5 Primary Industries Sector Labour Agreements:

- the Horticulture Industry labour Agreement (31 Occupations)
- the Meat Industry Labour Agreement (1 occupation),
- the Fishing Industry Labour Agreement (7 occupations)
- the Dairy Industry Labour Agreement (2 occupations),
- the Pork Industry Labour Agreement (1 occupation).

Several issues are of note:

Some occupations such as Mobile Plant Operator are in severe shortage and we have seen a number of crops not being harvested as a result. The problem is they are Skill Level 4. Without an adequate supply of such operators, production levels are destined to fall.

The skill levels allocated to some horticulture occupations vary substantially due to the nature and size of the operation. Examples are the large scale hydroponic farms (Large Greenhouses) that are temperature controlled and computer controlled, quite different from field crops in the same industry although the occupational titles are the same or similar e.g. Large companies use Growers, Facility Managers and Section Managers whereas the smaller companies have Growers and Farm Managers.

Similarly, occupational titles such as Production Horticulture Supervisor and Production Horticulturalist, vary considerably from Amenity Horticulture Supervisors (Garden Centres) which predominantly grow



flowers. Whilst they all require biosecurity skills, Production Horticulture Supervisors and Managers require food safety skills and quality parameters aligned with the specific product freshness, sizes, and weights required for supermarket chains.

Catch all job titles can and have resulted in skill shortages due to incorrect skill definitions.

The following lists are considered to be the Priority Shortage occupations that should form the basis for the CSOL. If the CSOL is to have any relevance with actual skill demand, including priority skill demand, it should broadly align with the Labour Agreements and include the Skill Level 4 and 5 occupations that are in extreme shortage.

## **Priority Occupations in Shortage to be added to the Core Skills Stream**

### **Dairy Industry**

- |  |               |
|--|---------------|
| · Senior Dairy Cattle Farm Worker (363213) | Skill Level 3 |
| · Dairy Cattle Farm Operator (070499)      | Skill Level 4 |

### **Horticulture Industry**

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| · Facility Plant Manager (149913)                 | Skill Level 2                    |
| · Irrigation Design Manager (234111)              | Skill Level 1                    |
| · Agronomist (234112)                             | Skill Level 1                    |
| · Horticulture Grower (070499)                    | Skill Level 1                    |
| · Protected Cropping Grower (070499)              | Skill Level 1                    |
| · Mechanical Engineer (233512)                    | Skill Level 1                    |
| · Horticulture Farm Manager (070499)              | Skill Level 1                    |
| · Biosecurity Officer (311399)                    | Skill Level 2                    |
| · Facility Supervisor (070499)                    | Skill Level 2                    |
| · Mechanic (321211)                               | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Agriculture Technician (321212)                 | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Fitter and Welder (323213)                      | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Maintenance Electrician (341111)                | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Senior Nurseryperson (362411)                   | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Nurseryperson (362411)                          | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist (363114) | Skill Level 3                    |
| · Mobile Plant Operator (721111)                  | Skill Level 4                    |
| · Forklift Driver (721311)                        | Skill Level 4                    |
| · Truck Driver (733111)                           | Skill Level 4                    |
| · Irrigationist (841999)                          | Skill Level 5                    |
| · Cold Storage Manager (149999) (070499)          | Skill level 3 Not Listed on OSCA |

### **Seafood Industry**

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| · Master Fisher (231211)                      | Skill Level 1 |
| · Ship's Master (231213)                      | Skill Level 1 |
| · Ship's Engineer (Fishing Industry) (070499) | Skill Level 1 |
| · Aquaculture Supervisor (363111/363199)      | Skill Level 3 |
| · Fishing Leading Hand (363112)               | Skill Level 3 |
| · Deck Hand (899211)                          | Skill Level 4 |
| · Seafood Process Worker (831313)             | Skill Level 5 |



## **Meat Industry**

· Skilled Meat Worker (070499)

Skill Level 5

## **Pork Industry**

· Senior Stockperson (Piggery) (363214)

Skill Level 3

## **Viticulture Industry**

· Vineyard Supervisor (363117)

Skill Level 3

In regard to the Horticulture Demand occupations, it is important to understand the key roles that **Agriculture Technicians** perform in the industry. The significant shift towards advanced hydroponic growing systems has resulted in a large number of job roles changing with more technical/managerial tasks.

Whilst the term Agricultural Technician is a general title, in fact the term applies to a number of workers who are working with a range of new technologies including seeding, propagation, growing, sorting and despatch. Many systems are now AI driven with autonomous processing with operatives who manage specific sections of the business, all with technical skills..

In relation to the 16 occupation list that JSA requires further evidence for inclusion on the CSOL shortage lists, the following is noteworthy:

## **Aquaculture Supervisor (363111).**

The aquaculture industry is made up of three sectors, Marine based (offshore) Marine based inshore/estuarine and Land based aquaculture. The skills required between land based and marine based aquaculture are quite different. By far the largest sectors for employment are Marine based with the Tuna and Kingfish industries employing around 2300 people servicing around 900 large sea cages.. The Salmon industry in Tasmania is the second largest with the mollusc industry (Oysters, mussels, abalone etc) an important industry across Australia.

There has been a steady growth of these industries over the past twenty years. This has resulted in high demand for maritime skills for the feed boats and cage maintenance as well as aquaculture management skills to manage fingerling growth in hatcheries, harvesting of product and quality and food safety requirements.

Whilst the term Aquaculture Supervisor is generic, nomenclature includes middle management supervisory roles such as Aquaculture Manager (Hatchery or Sea Cages or Operations). These are roles that report to the Chief Executive, the Director or the Farm Manager. In smaller land based operations, such as abalone farms, prawn farms, barramundi farms and yabbies, typically there may be between 1 and 3 Supervisors depending upon the size of the operation.

Demand for aquaculture supervisors remains high in the offshore sea cage sector and in some inshore aquaculture farms (mostly larger scale oyster farms)..

## **Fishing Leading Hand (363112)**

This occupation has been in shortage or several years along with experienced fishing crew (Deck Hands). The main reason has been a loss of young people in regional settings and especially to the Mining and Gas sectors in WA and to larger cities in the Eastern States. These fishing positions also sometimes integrate with the Marine Aquaculture industry as wild tuna are caught in the Bight and then grown out (fattened) in Sea cages. The lack of these skilled fishers has resulted in quite a number of vessels being tied up.



### **Horticultural Supervisor or Specialist (363114)**

There is a significant shortage in both the protected cropping sector and field crop sectors. Traditionally staff would have been promoted to supervisory roles over time. Some of these would have a related horticulture qualification but with fewer permanent staff available, there is now a skills deficit.

The specific demands of the Production Horticulture sector (mostly food production), require people with a wide range of “compliance” knowledge and skills (quality food standards). There have been long term supervisory and management skills shortages for these roles.

It is also important to note that the Amenity Horticulture sector, which is experiencing significant growth, is also short of such workers (Nursery and Garden Industry)

### **Senior Broadacre Crop and Livestock Farm Worker (363115)**

#### **Senior Broadacre Crop Farm Worker (363116).**

The broadacre sector has been subject to significant change over the past two decades. Farm aggregation has been a key feature as farmers with smaller farms retire. At the same time, shortages of key personnel have resulted in the more widespread use of autonomous tractors and equipment and increased farm storage of crops (Grains). In a number of cases large contractors are sowing and harvesting crops in specific regions for groups of farmers (Collaborative Farming).

Despite these developments, there remains a lack of experienced farm workers to assist in the growing and production areas of the farms. Part of this also relates to many farms operating across sectors (mostly livestock and grains) but also aquaculture and grains in some coastal regions.

The loss of young people from regional areas to the capital cities has left regional areas without sufficient next generation workers. This has devastated many smaller communities, particularly in remote regional areas and undermined the viability of many regional businesses.

### **Vineyard Supervisor (363117).**

This occupation has been in short supply for a number of years. The growth of the Table Grapes sector and especially the export sector, which is now worth \$620 million, has required a number of specialist people including agronomists and supervisor/managers. Whilst demand varies due to seasonality and trade restrictions, people with these skills are still in short supply. These positions are regularly advertised through specialised primary industry recruitment agencies such as Lucas Group, Rimfire, Agri Labour Australia and Rural Enterprises.

Table Grapes Australia, one of the peak bodies for the sector, believes the occupation will still need to be available for skilled migrants due to projected demand especially from countries such as South Africa. Our recommendation would be to include this occupation given continuing high growth in the table grapes sector.

### **Senior Dairy Cattle Farm Worker (363213)**

The Dairy industry has been through a period of restructuring over the past two decades, but they still have difficulties sourcing any workers due in the main to regional locations and the hours of work. Recent industry evaluations suggest that this occupation should remain as in shortage.

### **Senior Piggery Stockperson (363214)**

The sector has had to rely on migrant labour for much of their skill demand due to a lack of interest within the domestic market and in many instances the remote locations of the businesses. Over the past two decades the sector has utilised migrant labour for a range of positions including skilled stockpersons, managers and especially those with veterinary backgrounds.

The sector shares similar issues with other Primary Industry sectors in accessing any labour let alone skilled labour. The occupation of Senior Piggery Stockperson should be retained as in shortage.



## **Livestock Industries (Beef, Sheep and Goats)**

Discussions with the National Farmers Federation have verified that there are long term shortages of experienced workers in this sector and especially for those that have worked on large stations.

The occupational categories that are under consideration are:

**363211 Senior Beef Cattle Station Worker**  
**363212 Senior Cattle and Sheep Farm Worker**  
**363215 Senior Sheep Farm Worker**  
**363299 Senior Livestock Farm Workers nec**

The industry has been struggling to source sufficient workers at a time of reduced international migration and a continuing high turnover of personnel. Competition with other industries has also been a factor in retaining workers. With few young people interested in working in the sector, especially as the nature of the work is unattractive, the only option open to employers is to recruit experienced personnel from overseas.

Each of the above four occupational categories continue to be in short supply and need to be retained for skill migration purposes.

### **Summary**

Getting reliable occupational demand data is critical if we are to avoid shortages of food and significantly higher costs for that food over the next 5-10 years. The population drift from regional to urban centres has gathered pace over the past decade resulting in regional areas experiencing significant population ageing.

To maintain functioning regional centres, the Skills Strategy and the Migration Strategy in particular must be able to provide sufficient skilled workers to produce food for an Australian population that will increase by around 30% by 2050.

In relation to the current skill shortages being reported by industry, Australia will face a potential crisis in food production that will be difficult to turn around. At the heart of the problem is inaccurate data on regional skill demand, a lack of a meaningful decentralisation policy to re-invigorate regional communities and an infrastructure program that is focussed on mega city development. The current Skilled Migration program continues to fail regional areas and especially primary industry sectors.

As a first step, we strongly recommend that JSA add the occupations in shortage (Listed above) to the CSOL for the purpose of the Skill in Demand Visa and begin to turn around the current serious skill deficits that the Primary Industries sector is experiencing.

Please do not hesitate to contact the writer if you have any further queries.

Sincerely

[Redacted Signature]

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