



TITLE: Joint Standing Committee on Migration

INTENTION: For Noting

Recommendation

That the Board notes the outcomes of SADA's appearance before the Federal Joint Standing Committee on Migration and supports continued advocacy for:

- Recognition of modern dairy workforce skills within state and federal migration occupation lists;
- Improved migration pathways for skilled dairy employees;
- Increased focus on regional housing shortages impacting workforce attraction and retention; and
- Greater acknowledgement of dairy's role in food security, exports and regional economic development.

Background

On Monday 4 May 2026, SADA representatives Andrew Curtis and Alison Amber appeared before the Federal Joint Standing Committee on Migration as part of its inquiry into migration settings and workforce needs.

SADA provided evidence outlining the increasing workforce challenges facing the South Australian dairy industry and the growing reliance on skilled migration to support regional dairy businesses.

The discussion focused on:

- Workforce shortages in dairy farming;
- The evolution of modern dairy workforce skill requirements;
- Challenges with current migration occupation classifications;
- Regional housing shortages impacting workforce recruitment; and
- The importance of long-term workforce stability in dairy farming.

Discussion

SADA highlighted that while the majority of South Australian dairy farms remain family-owned and operated, increasing farm scale and technological advancement have created greater demand for skilled external employees.

The committee heard that modern dairy farming requires advanced skills in animal husbandry, herd health, technology systems, robotics, sensors and farm management, however current migration occupation lists continue to classify dairy workers under outdated "farm worker" definitions that do not reflect the technical nature of modern dairying.



SADA also raised concerns around regional housing shortages, particularly in the South East, where lack of accommodation is becoming a significant barrier to recruitment and retention of workers, including migrants.

The discussion reinforced that dairy farming differs from many other agricultural industries due to its year-round operational requirements. Unlike seasonal industries, dairy farms require stable, long-term employees to support daily animal care and milk production.

SADA further emphasised the importance of skilled migration pathways for workers from countries with livestock and dairy backgrounds, including the Philippines, South America and parts of Europe.

The hearing also provided an opportunity to reinforce the importance of the dairy industry to South Australia's food security, export growth and regional economies, and the need for migration policies that support future industry growth and sustainability.



TRANSCRIPT

Monday, 4 May 2026 Joint Page 42

MIGRATION JOINT COMMITTEE

AMBER, Mrs Alison, Executive Officer, South Australian Dairyfarmers Association

CURTIS, Mr Andrew, Chief Executive Officer, South Australian Dairyfarmers Association

[14:13]

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you to both of you for appearing before us today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Thank you for your submission to the inquiry. I'll now invite you to make a five-minute short opening statement—no more than five minutes—and then we'll proceed to discussions. I think it's better, and we get a lot more out of just having a discussion. We do have your submission here, which has been tabled and is there for everyone to see and to look at. On that note, I'll ask you to do your opening statement.

Mr Curtis: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. The South Australian Dairyfarmers Association was pleased to put in a submission because of the importance of the committee's inquiry for South Australian dairy farmers and our ability to continue to operate. For the most part, we want to speak to our submission and therefore would welcome the opportunity to have discussions.

As an opening comment, I would highlight that we are in the throes of preparing a celebration for the 90th year of South Australian Dairyfarmers Association's existence. For the last 90 years, we have represented dairy farmers across the state. Some of the issues have varied as we've evolved, but others like workforce and drought have been constants throughout the 90 years. We're pretty proud of the fact that we have a continuous 90 years as an organisation and that we have continued to support our members through that time. At the peak, we had about 2½ thousand members. We now have a bit over 100, but we produce about 10 times as much milk as we were producing in the thirties and forties. The industry has evolved, but some issues have stayed the same, and certainly workforce both domestic and through migration has been a critical issue right through that time.

CHAIR: Would you like to add anything, Mrs Amber? No. I might kick off.

Mrs Amber: That wrapped it all up very nicely!

Mr Curtis: Chair, I will highlight that Alison leads our workforce engagement across the industry. Whilst I've got the flag, she's often the brains behind the thing, which is important for the *Hansard* records. We look forward to the discussion.

CHAIR: I'll kick off with a couple of questions. Thank you for appearing before us today. Obviously, the dairy industry is a big industry for South Australia, and we acknowledge the work that you do to benefit the economy of this state in terms of exporting and the whole range of other things that create jobs. I'll kick off by asking this: In terms of skilled migration—sourcing labour from overseas with certain skills—what's the experience been of the industry and what sort of skills is there a shortage of? If you are sourcing labour from overseas, what sort of skills are they that you're looking at?

Mrs Amber: I think, first and foremost, probably the most important point there is the fact that, I think, 92 per cent are family owned and run. So, while there is a workforce shortage, just understand that the majority of families are all working across their own dairy farms.



Mr Curtis: I think that's a critical thing. As I mentioned, from the member numbers, the scale of those family businesses has increased. This is a parliamentary privilege bit, so I don't get shot by my members. As generations have been educated and given permission to leave the farm, the need for an imported workforce other than a family workforce has continued to become more important.

The other reality of the industry is the level of technical expertise and expectation has increased. The expectations around animal husbandry and animal welfare are significantly increased. That's a key area that we certainly seek migrants from a range of countries to support where they have the required skills to be able to manage large ruminant animals and also the desire to work in a rural agricultural setting and community. So there are a couple of those critical things.

We need more skilled farm workers than was perhaps defined back when farm workers were defined, and we need them to be able to work in a regional setting. Half of our industry is based around Mount Gambier, so it's five-hour drive from the metropolitan centre of South Australia and five from Melbourne. Whilst it doesn't look isolated, it is isolated from a family. We need skills and we need people that can do traditional roles in a more skilled and educated way.

In addition to that, the application of technology means that we have robots milking cows and we have sensors everywhere. The ability to work with technology is a critical issue that's been evolving since the fifties, but the last 15 or 20 years has just gone—as it has with society. But we haven't moved Mount Gambier any closer to the population centres.

CHAIR: There are dairy farms that are closer as well.

Mr Curtis: Absolutely. We have a cluster of farms at Mount Compass that we have great delight in taking urban groups to, including some parliamentarians and department staff, to experience and understand what we do in dairy, but we can't produce all our milk at Mount Compass.

CHAIR: In terms of the practical consequences of the misalignment of the occupation lists, the state government puts out priorities, the federal government puts out priorities and you have the priorities of the needed roles. What are they in your industry? Are they keeping up to date with the changes in the industry? I'll give you an example. You think of the lists of shortages that we have, and we've got everything from doctors to pharmacists to engineers et cetera, but we don't seem to think of the agriculture industries, I don't think. That's my perception of it.

Mr Curtis: That's our challenge. We talk about farm workers, but—well, it probably is the same as doctors. I'm in no position to comment on doctors, but the expectation of a doctor has evolved with technology, with knowledge, with everything, whereas the expectation of a farm worker hasn't. So we expect the same level of evolution in the people that we employ, but the skills lists that we work from still see a farm worker as they might have been in the seventies and eighties.

Mrs Amber: Which is nothing.

Mr Curtis: Which is absolutely nothing. It's partially our industry's challenge in that we need to better engage and influence that. But it is also really hard, which is part of the reason, as Alison mentioned, we take departmental staff, from a range of departments, out to see what modern dairying is so that they can understand and not take the stereotype, of what a farm worker was, as what's described in the skills lists that are generated at a state and federal level. So there is a misalignment, and it's probably because of evolution. But it makes it challenging for us. We want a farm worker and we want them with all these skills, but what 'farm worker' says doesn't necessarily capture all those skills.

CHAIR: Mr Rebello.

Mr REBELLO: One of your recommendations is 'coordinate migration settings with regional housing realities'. Could you speak to that and provide the context.



Mr Curtis: There's lots of commentary through the media, both within metropolitan areas and in other areas, about the need for housing and everything. It is particularly acute in a lot of regional settings. Again, there are others who are far better placed to comment on this, but it is far more cost effective for a builder or a developer to build a house in an urban metropolitan setting than in Mount Gambier or Millicent—the satellite towns of our regional centre—which means it is just challenging to have the housing. As we move from family employment to employment, we need houses because we're not going to put them up in the granny flat. So there's a parallel constraint. One is in being able to attract the right skills and describe them properly. And the other one is in being able to house them.

Mrs Amber: Correct—what he said.

Mr REBELLO: From your experience, how often do those housing or infrastructure issues prevent the employment of skilled migrants in your industry?

Mr Curtis: The challenge is that it's a chronic issue. So there's a lot of underperformance and underrecruitment, just because we know we don't have the houses. And there are local government constraints to putting a second dwelling on an agricultural property. We understand the historic reasons for that. It can lead to semi-closer settlement, and that's got a whole heap of challenges from a local government point of view that they don't want to support. So there are barriers there. You can't put another dwelling on the same title because of what happens in five years time, which leads to an underperformance because it's just too hard. There are challenges around the migration and recruitment process that are too hard. There are challenges around the housing of staff that are too hard.

Mrs Amber: I'm aware that there are quite a few, especially in the south-east around Mount Gambier. The first item on their job description is that they need to have housing—before animal welfare skills. So you need to have somewhere for them to sleep before you can figure out whether you're going to employ somebody on the animal welfare stays. It's probably more so in the south-east than here. But, yes, it is an issue.

Mr REBELLO: Thank you.

CHAIR: Ms Miller-Frost.

Ms MILLER-FROST: We've talked a lot about recognition of skills and qualifications. In terms of the sorts of skills that you're looking for, is there a qualification or is it more on-the-job experience? Where are you actually finding these workers when they can be found?

Mr Curtis: There are qualifications that exist. The ability to train to them is sometimes challenging. We have a really good TAFE within South Australia. However, it, like everything else, finds it more challenging to operate in thin markets, and agriculture tends to be a thin market. As you get down to a commodity like dairy, the market becomes really thin. So while we have diplomas of agriculture and certificate IVs, having qualified training to deliver them can be a challenge.

We're fortunate with the trainer that we currently have in Mount Gambier. They can train to a certificate IV level, but they can't train a diploma level. As I said, it's getting more and more that we're looking for diploma-level skills, particularly in our leading hands, the second-in-charge levels, who are being employed more and more rather than family. That is a key constraint. So we do rely on on-the-job training and non-accredited training, some of which is excellent. Through our industry body Dairy Australia, we've got some really good training, particularly at that 2IC management level. But we don't have—it's the wrong word—the 'roundedness' that a diploma offers, where you can pick up the full qualification. You can get really, really good at the nutrition of dairy or something, and you can learn everything you need to know and be at a PhD level in terms of how you manage the rumen and the feeding, but you don't necessarily have the other skills that having a qualification would bring you. Am I going alright?



Mrs Amber: You're spot on. What he means is that the qualification for cups-on, cups-off, which is just putting cups on a cow and taking them off, is not an accredited one. It's just run through Dairy Australia.

Ms MILLER-FROST: If you're trying to get skilled migrants from overseas, are there equivalent qualifications that you would look for? If we were going to have a list that said, 'Must have these quals,' is there such a thing.

CHAIR: One that comes to mind is animal husbandry. For example, there was a course that you could study. I can't remember if it was from university or TAFE. Would that be the sort of stuff?

Mr Curtis: Yes. Animal husbandry has really been lost. It's captured within an agriculture diploma. We can do a cert III in AG.

CHAIR: So that's gone? It's no longer?

Mr Curtis: There's not the market to have the defined course, but the skills are still needed. I will come back. We are dealing with animals, ruminant animals, that need to be husbanded, managed, every day. They need to be fed well. Unfortunately, I don't think there are any of my sheep colleagues in the room. If a sheep gets hungry for a few days, that's alright. She gets a bit cranky and what have you. To have a cow producing milk, she needs to be well tended every day. She needs to be healthy. She needs to be happy every day. So we need the skills to manage the cows every day so that they can produce milk, because, if they're not fed and looked after well, they choose No. 1 not to produce the milk.

Mrs Amber: The output equals the input. So if you slack off on the input, then the outputs don't do that good.

Mr Curtis: There are there are qualifications. My immediate thought is the Philippines. There are certainly qualifications within the Philippines. We do attract veterinary graduates from the Philippines to fuel farm worker type roles or leading hand roles, and in some cases from Argentina, and that's good. The challenge when they're overqualified is what's next.

Ms MILLER-FROST: That brings me to my next question.

Mr Curtis: No. 1 is we need to collectively describe the skills and the qualifications well and reflect modern dairying, but No. 2 is we need to be able to target those.

Ms MILLER-FROST: You also, in your recommendations, talked about prioritising stable regional settlement outcomes with a route to permanency. Is that the sort of workforce that you get? The reason I ask that, as a city person, is we hear about backpackers picking fruit and that a whole load of the agriculture or horticulture industry runs on backpackers. Hence, when we haven't had them, we've had problems. Are your people more stable or are they also on holiday? 'I'm here for a year or two years and then I'm'—

Mr Curtis: We certainly have a population of backpackers. We have some farms that rely on backpackers, and they're in for their 88 days. We have a couple of farms that use Irish backpackers. Basically, they send their cousins or their nephews or what have you, so they have a constant flow through—

CHAIR: Word of mouth.

Mr Curtis: Absolutely. Where it works, it works well. We have a similar relationship out of Germany, and that all goes back to, for a lot of us, how we were all migrants once or our ancestors were. We have groups that still have relationships with Germany, or what is now Germany, although their forebears came out a long time before what is now Germany was Germany. They still have backpackers. For the most part, we are looking for more stability. Then in the south-east, absolutely, we've got active recruitment for long-term people.

Mrs Amber: I think the most important aspect here is the fact that fruit picking is seasonal. Dairy farming is 24 hours a day every single day of the year. It's not seasonal. The cows don't stop milking. So, when they're doing



their 88 days—at the end of the 88 days, we don't want them to go. We've then got to find somebody else to fill that spot—

Unidentified speaker: Immediately, yes.

Mrs Amber: We're looking for permanent, yes.

Mr Curtis: Which is where there is opportunity out of Europe but also out of South America and places like the Philippines. The Philippines is good compared with a number of the Pacific islands because they have a livestock culture. A lot of the Pacific islands have been involved in fruit picking and various other programs. They just don't have that animal husbandry culture that is critical because we're dealing with really big animals. They're 500- to 700-kilogram animals. They need to be nurtured. You can't tell them what to do.

Mrs Amber: It's quite a different disposition for a dairy cow, because they're handled every day, whereas beef and sheep are seasonal again. They're the better animals.

Ms MILLER-FROST: They're beautiful!

Mr Curtis: That can be [inaudible].

CHAIR: Ms Fernando, on the line, is another committee member joining us who's got a question. Ms Fernando?

Ms FERNANDO: The question that I have is: has your organisation [inaudible] designated area migration agreements, and, if so, what was your organisation's experience of the migration settings?

Mrs Amber: I'm going to leave that one to you.

Mr Curtis: As an organisation, we don't have a lot of experience with the area migration program. For Adelaide, there are some positives because it fits within a regional area, where most other mainland capitals don't. We have had more success as an industry through the industry-specific migration program for the dairy industry, which I've lost the name of—

Mrs Amber: Are you talking about DILA—the dairy industry labour agreement?

Mr Curtis: Yes—as I said, I just talk a lot. I can't say that it's been specifically useful for the industry. We do have continual—not constant, but continual—questions of, 'How do we go?' and 'Where do we go?' That's not the easy solution that we're able to offer. We work with a number of migration agents who have specialties in different regions of the world, but each case needs to be its own thing, and we need to build it from scratch depending on the demands rather than having something that provides us an easy pathway.

CHAIR: This is more of a discussion than a question: obviously the dairy industry is very important to Australia's food security. We've seen industries, especially here in South Australia, exporting yoghurts overseas, skim milk, powdered milk, cheese and a whole range of things. It's a big benefactor to our economy here in South Australia. Are those things taken into account? Does that message of the importance of the dairy industry—that we milk our cows every day and produce all these products that do go overseas and feed our nation—get through to governments, agencies and organisations? I don't want to use the word 'priority' when it comes to ticking off on particular skills that we require, but what about some form of urgency? It is a special industry; it's a little different from other industries in terms of food security and exports. Exports are a big part of the dairy industry nowadays. Gone are the days where we'd milk the cows, give it to AMSCOL and Dairy Vale and they'd deliver the milk to households. It's much bigger than that.

Mr Curtis: It is bigger.



CHAIR: I have a confession to make. I worked for AMSCOL many, many years ago and for Dairy Vale after that, when they shut down. It was in the seventies.

Mr Curtis: I'll follow that by saying that, in preparation for our 90-year celebrations, we've had the opportunity to go through our archives, including the contribution by Frank Beauchamp, his grandfather and other forebears were key parts of AMSCOL and the delivery of milk from dairy farms to metropolitan Adelaide. Export has been a critical part, whether it's butter and cheese or, in more recent times, powder and yoghurt. It's a critical

and lattes. We need to be able to produce more than fresh milk, and, in order to do that, it's important that we have export pathways.

In South Australia, as an industry, we have developed the South Australian industry action plan, which is based on growing the industry and producing premium products, like the yoghurt I'm sure you're referring to, for export markets. We see big opportunities in South-East Asia and the Middle East. Like everyone else in our society, we are confused and concerned by the current goings on and what it means to the future markets, both our export markets and our cost of producing for domestic markets. Part of the underlying reason for wanting to be here is our need to have access to skilled people to continue to develop our industry and support the ongoing mechanisation and technology of our industry. It means that while we have these issues, like Iran and the Strait of Hormuz—did I get that right?—we still need access to and we still need to work with migrants and skilled people. And I think I have totally lost your question in my response.

Food security is critical, and the combination between exporting and domestic supply, and therefore food security for South Australians and Australians, is very closely linked. We need to be able to supply the world to be able to commit to supplying Australia every day.

CHAIR: As there are no further questions, I'd like to thank you for appearing before us today. Thank you for your evidence. Everything will be taken into consideration. If there's anything you've been asked to provide, any additional information—I can't quite remember if there was—or if there is any additional information that you'd like to provide, please send it through to the secretariat by Friday 5 June or thereabouts.

Mr Curtis: We'll have a debrief.

CHAIR: You will also be sent a transcript of every word said here today. You will have an opportunity to request corrections to that transcript if you think there are any errors in it. Once again, thank you so much for presenting to us. If we require anything else, we may be in touch with you as well—and vice versa. Thank you so much for presenting to us today, and thank you for the work that you do here in South Australia.

Mr Curtis: Thank you all very much for the opportunity.

Proceedings suspended from 14:46 to 14:56