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Immigration New Zealand letting down silviculture industry

The Forest Industry Contractors Association (FICA) is calling on Immigration New Zealand to reassess its position on silviculture migrant worker policy, following a series of recent rejections that have been brought to light.

Forest Industry Contractors Association CEO Prue Younger says she has been fielding calls and emails from several frustrated Silviculture Contractors, who feel let down by Immigration New Zealand.

“I’ve been hearing multiple stories of Immigration New Zealand wasting valuable time and shifting the goal posts on contractors, who are just trying to fill their workforce shortages and meet the obligations of their planting contracts,” she says.

“One contractor I’ve spoken to has been short at least 20 staff this season, having to turn down at least 830ha of work this season.”

The contractor who does not wish to be named, says “we got screwed by Immigration New Zealand. We submitted so much factual information in our long running application...we were rejected because the staff were deemed not qualified, even though they had [NZQA] modules and 1-2 years planting experience. Under INZ's policy experienced is classed as 1 year or more seasons.”

“We were also rejected because the forest planting operation was not time dependent or of economic benefit to the community or the country. We submitted evidence from nurseries and forest companies about the time critical nature and NIWA reports on soil/weather status now/forecast. Forest consultants also gave evidence on the economic value. “

“The benefit was 50 full time forestry jobs for 12 months and a dollar value of \$48m in today’s money. We had the 20 quarantine spots booked and the flights booked. We would have pumped \$400k of wages into the Fijian villages. Instead, we’ve had to turn down work because we can’t get them here.”

Another contractor submitted an AIP application to INZ for workers in January 2020 after an exhaustive and ongoing campaign to recruit local New Zealand workers. After providing numerous evidence to Immigration New Zealand, they received a rejection a year later in January 2021.

“We have been required to submit numerous further evidence in support of our application which appears to have been ignored. We now find ourselves again in the position of being asked to withdraw our application even though we have invested a vast amount of both money and time on the application to prove our company is both robust and compliant in all labour, immigration and legislation requirements,” says the contractor.

“We believe that INZ have continued to work against our company rather than with us to ensure, under all circumstances we are not found to be compliant. From the latest correspondence there seems to be no point in continuing as all efforts are futile.”

In recent weeks, the Government announced a delay on the introduction of the Accredited Employer Work Visa scheme, from 1 November 2021 now pushed out until mid-2022. That means an extension for certain essential skills visas by at least a year and making the application process simpler while Covid-19 border restrictions are in place.

Employment and Immigration Lawyer Mark Luscombe says “Minister Faafoi’s announcement will be a huge relief to employers and workers alike. It provides some temporary clarity for existing workers and their employers and, ongoing shortage issues aside, the sector can work to a 2–3 year plan. Just don’t expect the borders to be thrown open any time soon – we must accept that reality. For foreign workers (and especially those separated from their families since the pandemic began or longer) the future remains uncertain - we don’t know what longer-term pathways will be available to migrant workers once the current categories are phased out on 1 November 2021. I can’t imagine Faafoi intends to leave people hanging in this way, so I expect he will give us further details closer to 31 October”.

Ms Younger says while this recent announcement provides some short-term relief, Government also needs to take a longer-term view and work with the industry, not against it.

“The rejections and time wasting from Immigration New Zealand are affecting migrant workers, their families, our silviculture contractors / business owners, our nation’s tree planting goals and more,” she says.

“We have work sitting there, and migrant workers wanting the work while we can’t fill the roles locally. It helps everybody so why is it so hard to make this happen?”

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For more information contact FICA

Prue Younger, CEO

office@fica.org.nz

021 276 5484