

Mid-North Coast blueberry farms back in spotlight

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Fair Work Ombudsman inspectors will return to the NSW Mid-North Coast this month to conduct further auditing of local blueberry farms.

The spot checks aim to ensure seasonal workers are being paid correctly.

Last season, the Fair Work Ombudsman found two employers had underpaid 13 seasonal workers almost \$10,000.

They included backpackers from Canada, Chile, Germany, Indonesia, Italy and Taiwan in Australia on the 417 working holiday visa.

The largest underpayment was \$6445 for nine pickers at one farm.

The operator also received a \$510 Infringement Notice (on-the-spot fine) for failing to issue pay-slips to employees.

A second property was required to back-pay four pickers a total of \$3441.

Last season's checks and this month's return visits are part of the Fair Work Ombudsman's ongoing national Harvest Trail project.

The project is being conducted in response to persistent complaints and concerns about the horticulture sector's compliance with federal workplace laws.

Fair Work Ombudsman Natalie James says inspectors will make return visits to farms assessed last season, as well as random visits to others.

Growers and any labour-hire contractors supplying pickers to the farms will be apprised of their obligations under workplace laws.

"These visits provide an opportunity for us to ensure those we met last season are now fully compliant with workplace laws and that any new entrants to the industry are fully aware of their obligations," Ms James said.

Blueberry farms in the region rely heavily on labour from overseas workers, in particular working holiday makers, and employees from non-English speaking backgrounds.

"Overseas workers can be vulnerable if they are not fully aware of their rights under Australian workplace laws, and they are often reluctant to complain, so it's important we are proactive in checking they are being paid correctly," Ms James said.

Where businesses are found to be non-compliant, the preference of inspectors will be to assist employers to correct the issues by agreement and back-pay any underpaid employees.

Key stakeholders, including the Australian Blueberry Growers Association and a local grower co-operative have been consulted.

Fair Work inspectors recently conducted a free information session for growers about their obligations under the Fair Work Act and Horticulture Award 2010.

Employers and workers seeking assistance can consult the industry-specific information available at www.fairwork.gov.au/harvesttrail, or call the Fair Work Infoline on 13 13 94. A free interpreter service is available on 13 14 50.

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