

Tasmanian blueberry, strawberry farm visits

27 January 2015

Fair Work Ombudsman inspectors will visit blueberry and strawberry farms in Tasmania in February to ensure seasonal workers are being paid correctly.

The Fair Work Ombudsman's Regional Services Team is making the site visits to randomly selected properties in the North, North-West and South as part of its three-year Harvest Trail project.

Growers and labour-hire contractors will be asked to open their books, allowing inspectors to view records, with a particular emphasis on minimum pay rates, loadings and penalties.

Record-keeping and pay slip obligations will also be monitored.

Fair Work Ombudsman Natalie James says it is important growers and labour-hire contractors understand their workplace obligations and comply with them.

Ms James says many farms rely heavily on labour from overseas workers, in particular working holiday makers, and employees from a non-English speaking background who may not be fully aware of their workplace rights.

In August last year, the Fair Work Ombudsman also commenced a year-long review of the wages and conditions of overseas workers in Australia on the 417 working holiday visa after receiving allegations that some unscrupulous operators were exploiting backpackers looking to extend their stay by working in regional areas for up to 88 days.

"We are conscious many fruit pickers are young and overseas workers who may be vulnerable if they are not fully aware of their entitlements or reluctant to complain, so it's important that we are pro-active about ensuring they are paid correctly," Ms James said.

Checking that employers are complying with their obligation to have written agreements in place for workers paid piece rates is also a key focus of the Harvest Trail program.

"This is a really important issue. In the absence of a written piece rate agreement workers are required to be paid hourly pay rates," Ms James said.

Ms James says that during the audits, pickers and packers will be encouraged to come forward with any queries or concerns they have.

The preference of Fair Work inspectors will be to assist employers to voluntarily rectify any issues.

However, in cases of serious, deliberate or repeated contraventions, or if employers are not willing to co-operate, they may consider taking further action.

Inspectors will also educate employers about the range of free resources available at www.fairwork.gov.au/harvesttrail to assist them to comply with workplace laws.

Employers and workers seeking assistance can visit the website or call the Fair Work Infoline on 13 13 94. A free interpreter service is available on 13 14 50.

Follow Fair Work Ombudsman Natalie James on Twitter [@NatJamesFWO](https://twitter.com/NatJamesFWO) (<http://twitter.com/NatJamesFWO>), the Fair Work Ombudsman [@fairwork_gov_au](https://twitter.com/fairwork_gov_au) (http://twitter.com/fairwork_gov_au) or find us on Facebook www.facebook.com/fairwork.gov.au (<http://www.facebook.com/fairwork.gov.au>).

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Fair Work Online: www.fairwork.gov.au

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