

Harvest Trail turns to Tasmania's wine industry

1 May 2015

Fair Work Ombudsman inspectors will visit Tasmania's Tamar Valley and Coal River wine regions next week as part of an ongoing focus on the entitlements of seasonal workers.

The Agency's Regional Services Team will conduct site visits to up to 15 randomly-selected vineyards as part of its three-year Harvest Trail project.

Fair Work inspectors will speak to growers and labour-hire contractors about their obligations under federal workplace laws and encourage any employees with concerns to come forward.

Acting Fair Work Ombudsman Michael Campbell says improving awareness of workplace laws is the main reason for the visits, but any non-compliance issues will need to be addressed.

"We can tell a lot about an employer's level of compliance by talking to them and their workers, but we'll look at their records if we need to get a clearer picture," Mr Campbell said.

Ensuring that employers are aware of their obligation to have written agreements in place for workers paid piece rates is 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," Mr Campbell said.

Fair Work inspectors will assist employers to voluntarily rectify any issues by agreement. However, in cases of serious, deliberate or repeated contraventions, or if employers are not willing to co-operate, they may consider enforcement action.

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

The Fair Work Ombudsman has enlisted the support of Wine Tasmania, the peak body for Tasmanian grape growers and winemakers, to help promote the site visits and compliance with federal workplace laws amongst its members.

Mr Campbell says many farms around the country rely heavily on labour from overseas workers, in particular working holiday makers and employees from non-English speaking backgrounds.

In August last year, the Fair Work Ombudsman commenced a national 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.

"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," Mr Campbell said.

Earlier this year, Fair Work inspectors audited randomly-selected blueberry and strawberry farms in North, North-West and Southern Tasmania as part of the Harvest Trail project.

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.

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