

GUEST EDITORIAL

Labour shortage in rural areas: solving the problem cooperatively

by Basil Goodman

Chairman, Seasonal Solutions Ltd

Seasonal Solutions Cooperative Ltd (SSCO) is a relative newcomer to the New Zealand cooperatives scene.



Seasonal Solutions was originally formed under the guidance of John Allan acting as Southern Regional Commissioner for the Ministry of Social Development (MSD).

The goal was to build a grower-owned organization that took ownership of recruiting work-ready seasonal labour into the Central Otago region.

At the time, the lack of a quality sustainable workforce in small towns such as Roxburgh, Alexandra and Cromwell was seen as an impediment to the growth of the local fruit and wine industries.

Following a district-wide grower seasonal labour requirement survey, I was appointed director and sole shareholder of Seasonal Solutions Central Otago Ltd., and issued with the first 100 shares in the new company. The contract with MSD was simply to make things work.

To begin with I gathered around me an advisory group who met monthly to discuss primarily two things: ideas on solving local growers' seasonal labour shortages, and how to bring grower ownership to the new company.

Within two years, the cooperative had been formed and the advisory group had become the directors of the transformed business.

MAJOR OPPORTUNITIES

In the past three years, the co-op has grown significantly. We now have 75 shareholding members who represent around 75% of the planted fruit and grape area in the region.

A survey of members shows that they employ around 600 full-time staff and back this up with around 4,000 seasonal workers as well as 250 Pacific Islanders employed under the Government's new Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme.

Day-to-day operations are run out of an Alexandra office with a full-time general manager, two full-time office staff and numerous part-timers

spread across our various projects.

The ability to get RSE staff from the Pacific Islands gave two major opportunities to the co-op.

Firstly, it has enabled our growers to access a new type of worker who comes back season after season – some of our workers are now on their fourth visit. The reliance on overseas backpackers has gone and nobody seems keen to have this return!

Secondly it has given the co-op a tool by which it can become self sufficient in a strictly commercial sense.

SSCO is the employer of the RSE workers who are then sub-contracted out to growers who pay the co-op a management fee. SSCO takes care of all recruiting, travel and settling them into New Zealand (sometimes known as pastoral care), and then getting them home again.

Our members simply tell us the number needed, the date they want them to start, and the time they will be picked up.

A GROWING BUSINESS

Accessing these workers has also given the co-op a chance to expand outside Central Otago. Our expertise in recruiting and running staff now sees us with large teams in Marlborough, both in the



winter months for pruning as well as doing summer vineyard work.

It would be fair to say that this period of rapid expansion has placed a strain on both directors and staff. However these challenges have been met to date without any major problems.

Instead of wondering where the next dollar was coming from, we are now talking about how to rebate back to growers, and how to build reserves to see the cooperative through challenging periods in the future.

Other things we will be putting effort into in the coming twelve months include firming up the business plan and looking at business opportunities outside our co-op members which will enable us to add even more value to our members. ●

Basil Goodman,
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PHOTO: SEASONAL SOLUTIONS LTD

Seasonal workers from the Pacific Islands

PHOTO: SEASONAL SOLUTIONS LTD



The cooperative can be found online at www.jobscentral.co.nz

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