

Marlborough's Labour Issues

John Barker is the Manager of Policy and Membership for New Zealand Winegrowers and the spokesman for an action group established in Marlborough last month, to combat labour shortages within the industry. He answers questions about problems the Marlborough wine industry is facing.

What are the major issues facing Marlborough?

It's a difficult one to answer really, because there is a range of inter related issues. At the top, is an overall national labour and skills shortage, due to the very low unemployment rates.

On a regional level, this has been exacerbated in Marlborough because there is no unemployed pool of workers to call on. (Marlborough has roughly 137 people registered as unemployed, compared to 1171 in 2000.)

Add to that the rapid expansion in Marlborough vineyard area, particularly in the last three or four years. There are a lot of vines in the ground needing attention, which has brought the whole set of issues to a head.

Is Marlborough different to other wine growing regions?

Working on a national level, one of the things we have seen in the labour picture, is that every region is different. One of the interesting things in Marlborough is that horticulture is dominated by the grape and wine industry, where it is not so dominant in other parts of the country. So the seasonal timing for labour is different overall from a region such as Hawke's Bay

which has a lot of other types of horticulture.

Why has the labour shortage come to such a head now?

A big factor is the low unemployment and there are also a number of historical issues as well. A few years back a lot of labour for pruning would have come from the freezing works. You don't have that now. Also I don't think students are tending to move into districts for work, they tend to be heading back to their own towns in their off time.

How has the national body of New Zealand Winegrowers been involved in helping?

We have put a huge amount of time and resource into dealing with the issues around seasonal labour. We have been developing medium and long-term strategies with the horticulture industry and government for about a year now. It has been a very positive, cooperative process. It is important to realise that these issues cannot be solved by growers, contractors or Government acting in isolation. It is necessary for all those involved to work together.

Through this process, we have come up with a number of national initiatives. Some of those have come from the horticultural sector, others from the government. We are now working through those strategies to see how they can be implemented. The government is very aware of the problems and there is a lot going on related to them. (Immigration

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