

**Horticulture Policy Summit 2008**  
**RSE Breaking new ground**  
**Keynote presentation**  
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**On behalf of Horticulture New Zealand**

I consider myself to be someone comfortable with making choices and making decisions. Yet nothing had prepared me for the move from Botswana, (a country north of South Africa) to New Zealand, a first world country.

Not even in New Zealand for a week, I was asked to buy bread from Foodtown, similar to your Coles.

In Botswana this is a simple choice. Your choice is white bread or occasionally brown bread, and on rare occasions one would be lucky to get whole-wheat bread.

What lay before me in Foodtown was no simple choice. The selection was not between 1, 2 or 3 varieties, nor was it just one shelf. There were 5 shelves running the full length of the aisle to my left and to my right.

After a considerable amount of time looking at each variety, trying to distinguish between them I was completely overwhelmed, and left – without the bread.

The RSE programme is dependent on the policies and the procedures designed by people like you. But at the heart of it, it is about people, and helping those people make decisions that for you and I might be easy. But for the individual the choices can be overwhelming, like me with the bread.

These individuals are well supported by a myriad of stakeholders.

- The local and Pacific Island governments and communities
- The employers and the individuals helping with pastoral care

The biggest asset for the RSE programme is that every one of these stakeholders wants this programme to work.

In our first year of running with this programme I have seen government officials “breaking new ground”. Gone for me are the typical bureaucratic perceptions of Immigration and the Department of Labour officials as they have sat around the table with industry to mould and adapt this programme, forging a way forward.

That same tenacity is evident here in Australia. Travelling on a South African Passport, a visit to your beautiful country is made more complicated by my need for a visa. This usually takes a minimum of 2 working days to process, however Immigration came to the party and issued mine within 2 hours – on a Friday afternoon – after the office’s had closed.

This is a small demonstration of a willingness to “break new ground”.

I’ve been asked to be frank with you – to share what went well this year and what I would change if I knew then what I know now. I’ve chosen to briefly look at government, sending communities, employers, liaison officers and supply models.

#### Government

The New Zealand government’s flexibility has been a huge asset to this process. On inception the policy was not set in concrete – there was an initial 6 months of flexibility where potential issues would be addressed and policy changed. For example New Zealand has introduced a new IRD application process that requires duplicate material, and sighting of the applicant. The paperwork can take up to 10 working days to issue an IRD number.

After industry alerted IRD to the potential issues this would cause on the ground. IRD allowed us to use a previous process with a fax return within 2 days. This flexibility made the government approachable and allowed the RSE worker to receive their pay at normal tax rates.

The government worked to a tight deadline which helped create a sense of urgency, momentum and stimulating challenge for our RSE unit. There were regular round table discussions between all stakeholders. This open dialogue paved the way for change.

It would be helpful if our applications associated with our RSE process were streamlined to avoid excessive bureaucratic duplication.

### Sending Communities

The employers that built relationships with their sending community had a positive experience and this close contact prepared the individuals for the choices that lay ahead.

I believe that more time must be invested in these sending communities prior to both recruitment and departure. The obvious preparations that need to be made is preparing the community for the gap that is made by those going abroad, educating the individual on different climates, the use of electricity and local facilities – like banking.

Too little time was spent on financial literacy and management, understanding their contractual rights, understanding the protocol for complaints and dispute resolution as being different for every employer, goal setting and preparing for unexpected scenarios.

The diversity of 6 nationalities in our RSE programme has been good for our company. At work each gang was a single culture in a multi-cultural environment. For example we would have Ni-vans in their own working gang in a multi-cultural orchard or pack house. Every nationality presents a different blend of temperament, work ethic and physical stature. It is important for employers to work out what their needs are for each part of their season and how best to meet that with supply. In kiwifruit the height of the crop limits us to cultures that have the right stature.

Diversity of culture has been a positive experience for our RSE workers, our local staff and management. Our local community is enriched by the exposure to the Pacific cultures as soon as they step out their front door. Local businesses, such as 2<sup>nd</sup> hand clothing stores and supermarkets also benefit.

Unfortunately well meaning locals who don't understand the RSE policies and what to do or where to go when they are concerned about something have caused unnecessary negative media exposure. This need is being addressed on an ongoing basis.

### Employer

Being an employer is easy – the legislation is clear cut and the expectations are understood.

Being an RSE employer introduces a 24/7 pastoral care responsibility outside of work that in New Zealand has no disciplinary guidelines for socially unacceptable behaviour. As mentioned by Lionel in his presentation New Zealand initially seemed slow in acting on pastoral disciplinary issues. At the beginning of our season, we utilised a 3 strikes and you're out system as modelled in the Employment Relations Act. However there was no adjustment to behaviour and this had a negative impact on the community. By the middle of the season we moved to a one warning and you're out approach. This had a positive impact on behaviour and the community as we were seen to be taking action on unacceptable behaviour.

Design of a comprehensive code of conduct is essential and best done organically with a level of non-legislative standardisation. Talking around the table with Sefita and Lionel, it has become apparent that this needs to be in consultation with the sending community with a starting document presented by the employer.

Stepping into the great unknown for employers requires an initial high investment to employers on educating and arming them with accurate knowledge and support.

We are sourcing our staff from communities that understand the importance of communal processes and structures. These are not numbers in the orchard or the pack house, but individuals in need of communal

support and individual relationship. RSE is about the individual making choices and the support of strong relationships offers a safe environment for them to make good decisions.

### Liaison Officers

During our initial year each Pacific Island offered a contact person in New Zealand for extra assistance to the employer and the RSE worker when needed. This has been a valuable source of support in the programme, helping with cultural understanding for both the employer and the RSE worker. For example native translations when the kiwi explanation was misunderstood and insufficient.

### Supply models

The employer has had the flexibility to choose the method of supply that has suited them. This has ranged from direct recruitment to the use of agents in both the Pacific and New Zealand. The New Zealand agents offer pastoral care as well. Every method has its advantages and maintaining employer discretion in choice of method has been highly successful.

The employers that have started small and grown steady have done well. Those that have exploded into the RSE programme with large numbers have had an accelerated learning curve and are generally cutting back for their second year.

The exposure the industry had had in the past because of illegal workers and contractors has largely been purged by the supplementing of ready, legal and reliable labour.

### In conclusion

In conclusion the RSE programme has both hidden and direct costs that must be factored in as initial investment. Our returns will be realised in returning RSE workers. Our staffing capacity has moved from a historical 60 – 80% to between 90 and 100%. This, with training of our RSE workers has provided us with greater efficiency and a better end product.

For New Zealand, we are eager to use our RSE as a form of branding, of our products and our services. But for a brand to have value it must have high quality. I believe that some of this quality has been sacrificed by our fast acceleration of this programme.

If you take it slow in the implementation, growing and strengthening it at a steady pace, Australia and New Zealand will have a quality brand that we can be proud of, knowing that we have made the difference in our local and international governments, communities and employers.

But most of all, we would have helped each individual make the right choices to grow and develop themselves.

After all, without these individuals our industry would be in trouble.

You are the movers and shakers in this industry, in my assessment if there were three things I could drive home, it would be:

1. Flexibility in policy design
2. Open discussions between stakeholders and
3. Take it slow in the implementation