

Ten years of RSEs

Recognised Seasonal Employees enriching industry for a decade

Karen Carter - Fruition Horticulture

It has been 10 years since the Recognised Seasonal Employees (RSE) scheme was introduced and workers have been coming to the Bay of Plenty to prune, pick and pack kiwifruit over that time. While it is easy to see the benefits the industry receives from being able to use RSE workers, it is also timely to celebrate the significant contribution they make to the wellbeing of our wider communities.

Vanuatu links run strong

Mavis and Graham Dyer have been bringing four workers annually into New Zealand from Vanuatu every year since 1980, well before the official RSE scheme even began. All of their workers have come from the island of Santo and are related to each other in some way.

"The employees take pride in their work," Mavis explains. "They work twice as long and hard as everyone else - in fact, you

have to make sure they stop and rest. The workers are keen to come and we are keen to have them."

In return, the RSE workers are treated like family and accommodated in a two-storey house in the Dyer's grounds that was originally built as a home stay. Half a beast is put in the freezer and the workers have free access to a vegetable garden. Transport is provided and their shopping is done for them.

The Dyers see employing RSEs as their aid

contribution to Vanuatu but acknowledge they have ended up with an extended family. A holiday home has been built for their use in Santo by their workers. They have been there more than 20 times and are always greeted with a feast, which really shows the esteem the villagers hold for the Dyers, as their resources are limited.

Life is not easy in Vanuatu and Mavis and Graham have noted 'wasted aid' such as fancy tractors that no one can service or drive. Initially the RSEs themselves took

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Photo 1. Mavis and Graham Dyer, with their workers and additional NiVan guests, celebrating the safe arrival of the Tam tam (split drum) which was made for their home.

home useless commodities such as TVs and computers when they had no power. Now they are much more focused.

Most who have regular contact with RSEs note that the money they make in New Zealand tends to be spent on education for their children – secondary school fees are very expensive. Solar equipment is being purchased for lighting. Running water is key, with tanks, showers and flushing toilets slowly being installed. Many are now cyclone-proofing their houses including building concrete floors and blocked walls instead of the traditional mud floor and thatched roofs.

Mavis has also noticed an improvement in hygiene standards among their RSEs here, that has been extended to their best ability back home. She said the workers take better care of their health, including their teeth. Her family is really happy about that as simply put “their RSEs have enriched their lives”.

In good times and bad

Clive Exelby from Aongatete Coolstores has a similar story to tell. They recruit 20 or so Tongan RSEs every year and over time, they have become an extended family to the point where children have been named after various staff members. Conversely, the management team at Aongatete can tell you all about the RSE families, their homes and what they have



Photo 2. The RSE workers are a valuable part of the Aongatete family, says Clive Exelby.

achieved over the years coming to New Zealand to work.

Aongatete has provided extra training to selected RSE staff because as Clive says “they are so good at practical things”. He notices the RSE workers have more commitment and don’t get distracted like Kiwis can.

Needless to say the packhouse operation was greatly affected when five Tongans (four RSE and one permanent resident) were killed in a car accident last year while

leaving work. Four of these workers had additional tray-making training and one of them, with over 11 years’ work experience could “operate and fix their strapping machine like no other”.

In all, the loss of these skills, was of little concern compared with the heartache and pain that the entire workforce felt at the loss of these valued men. Nell and Allan Dawson, who own the packhouse, are committed to looking after the men’s families and, along with other measures,



Baygold's purpose-built accommodation for RSE workers.

the tidiest cabin each week. Very soon everyone's cabin was in the same state so they ended rotating the prize so that eventually everyone was rewarded for their efforts.

Baygold has a five-year plan which includes developing leadership skills in the younger men and spreading the wealth across more islands by employing people further afield than Tanna. They are also considering further encouragement by looking at scaling pay rates for performance and skills. Like other employers, Baygold is learning and finding better ways to work with their RSEs because they are such a valued workforce.

Like many RSEs Harry Vanva has been coming to New Zealand for a long time. Since 2008, Harry has worked for DMS, Satara and EastPack and this season he is working for Colin Contracting Ltd.

This work has enabled Harry to save and dramatically improve his family life. "My wife is happy, we have power, internet, washing machine - everything," Harry said. "Life is very hard in Vanuatu and we show the people what we can achieve. We want to help everyone change their life."

Harry is happy that the current company he is working for is employing men from more isolated islands so that the wealth can be shared. It is the first trip for many to New Zealand and he explained he has to teach the men the right attitude and all the basic things they need to do for working and saving.

Harry's son Ben confirmed many, including himself, have no work in Vanuatu except

“ The guys leave behind so much when they come here and they work so hard. ”

will recruit their adult children so that the gains made by the family can continue.

Clive like others is happy to report, after returning to Tonga every year to recruit, that he can see the quality of life has been lifted for the RSEs who have come here to work. As packhouse manager, he has gained reliable, hardworking employees - personally the lines have blurred to the point where his workers have become more like friends and family.

Homes away from home

Baygold Limited is another company investing in bringing RSEs into the country to work. Good local accommodation is an issue so they have bought and developed their own site.

Business Manager Paul Fawcett said it was part of being a socially responsible employer.

"The guys leave behind so much when they come here and they work so hard," Paul explained. "Providing good accommodation, adding seats around the trees for the men to sit and talk, putting in a petanque court and heating in the shared kitchen/dining room area is the least we can do for them."

Paul is amazed at how well RSEs can adapt between their two worlds. Baygold currently employs only male RSEs and at home, many are not used to cooking and cleaning. To encourage the men to keep their accommodation in order, they instigated a prize of fish and chips for



Harry Vanva, centre, has been coming to new Zealand for nearly a decade.

tending their gardens. Many have never worked before so it is a big shock to come here and work long hours six days a week. Even so, Ben said "it is better to work - we get bored in Vanuatu with no way to improve our future."

Building the RSE skills

Fruition Horticulture, while not an RSE employer, runs a programme for RSEs called Vakameasina which focuses on

English language literacy, numeracy, financial, digital literacy and life skills. This is funded by the New Zealand Aid Programme.

The New Zealand-wide programme focuses on topics selected by the learners and/or their employers that will improve the workers' life in New Zealand and back home.

Literacy and numeracy is embedded into whatever topic is taught.

Due to recent catastrophic events in the Pacific, many have had to rebuild their homes devastated by hurricanes, floods and tsunamis. In response, Vakameasina has constructed special training programmes to meet the ongoing and changing needs of the RSE workers who enter their classrooms.

In the Bay of Plenty, for example, a woodwork programme is delivered in Vincent House which has the facilities and

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Vakameasina students practice setting out footings.



Rose Hala's two shops; a small building in Buala in the centre of the village (top) and a two-storied place in Haevo Plantation, complete with a freezer.

equipment to produce wood products, at a factory level if necessary. While the learners did not use the industrial equipment, many have enjoyed drafting a template and using some basic hand-held power tools to make themselves a toolbox. They also learned how to set out footings and building foundations, adapt buckets and hoses as water level tools and other useful basic building techniques that they can apply at home.

Some tutors have visited and volunteered in the Pacific and all tutors get a real buzz when they hear about how the lessons in the classroom make a difference to the lives of their students when they return home.

Beside the literally 'concrete building and business stories', the Vakameasina tutors hear many accounts of changed behaviours being used after discussion in the classroom. They find it humbling and rewarding to hear how conflicts have been handled without violence, positive parenting skills being put in to practice to reduce smacking, men considering women have the right to say "No" and communities sharing their money to buy a generator for the good of all.

Giving back to the islands

As time has progressed, another programme has been funded as an offshoot of Vakameasina which is called Awhi. This is a course to help RSEs develop business or community projects when they return home. They are assisted to develop a business plan, marketing plan and a financial structure that allows for borrowing and debt servicing. They are also linked with local support networks in their domicile country.

Dorothy Rosevia (Rose) Hula, who completed an Awhi programme, has demonstrated how powerful this training can be for the RSEs. Rose's goal is to run her own business, selling fruit juice in Buala and at River Haevo Plantation in the Solomon Islands.

She has two buildings ready to go as business locations: one small building in Buala right next to the rest house in the centre of the village and a two-storey place in Haevo Plantation complete with a freezer. The supply of fruit is no problem; there is a productive garden around the property and the village gardens inland have an endless supply of fruit.



Rose Hala is selling fruit juice in Buala and at River Haevo Plantation in the Solomon Islands.

Rose is not satisfied with the progress of her business development to date but her motto is: "Never give up!"

She aims to broaden her thinking, trial new ideas such as selling ice blocks and sorbets and keep working on her business, having gained confidence in herself and her skills.

A note from the author

Vakameasina Programme Manager and tutor Karen Carter said the first 10 years of RSE have been a win:win:win. Much-needed work is being done, the RSE workers are able to take home much more money and the lives of all those involved and their communities are enriched.

"It is not clear who is teaching who here," Karen explains. "It is truly a shared and positive experience for everyone involved. The RSEs share what they have got, work so hard and still keep smiling. There are many more employees than those mentioned but I sure everyone agrees their contribution is an ongoing living celebration." ■

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