



Rebekha Sharkie MP

Federal Member for Mayo



MEDIA RELEASE

Sharkie calls for Australian students to become the nation's summer backpackers

Federal Member for Mayo Rebekha Sharkie is calling for a national program to encourage Australian university and TAFE students to work in our regions over summer, helping farmers meet seasonal labour demands while reducing their HECS debt.

The proposal follows the Federal Government's move to change the Working Holiday Maker program, including introducing a ballot for second and third year backpacker visas with a regional work requirement.

"We have thousands of young Australians looking for work over the summer holidays, at exactly the time many farmers need extra hands," Ms Sharkie said.

"Why not create an incentive for Australian students to become our own summer backpackers?

"Farm work is hard, physical work, but it's also a chance to earn some money, build experience and see parts of Australia many young people might never otherwise visit."

Under the proposal, eligible Australian students with a HECS-HELP debt who complete approved seasonal work in regional Australia would receive a \$500 credit against their HECS debt for every full-time week worked, in addition to their wages.

The Australian Taxation Office already manages HECS-HELP debt and could provide a mechanism for verifying earnings and applying the credit. The scheme would also include safeguards to ensure seasonal earnings don't unfairly disadvantage students receiving income-tested support such as Youth Allowance.

"This is not about replacing international workers or pretending one program can solve all of agriculture's workforce challenges," Ms Sharkie said.

"It's about adding another workforce pathway and making the most of the young Australians we already have.

"If we could get even 10,000 more Australian students working in regional areas over summer, it could make a real difference at harvest time while helping students reduce their HECS debt."

Ms Sharkie said the proposal should complement existing agricultural workforce programs.

"We know farmers need reliable workers and backpackers are an important part of the agricultural workforce, but if the Government is changing the settings for backpackers, we should also think creatively about where the next workers can come from.

"Universities and TAFEs already have employment services and connections with students. We should use that infrastructure to promote seasonal regional work."

Ms Sharkie said accommodation would also need to be addressed through existing backpacker and farm accommodation, as well as community-based arrangements.

"This could be much more than a job - it could be an Australian summer adventure," she said.

"Aside from a healthy bank account, students could realistically reduce their HECS debt by \$5,000 just by spending a summer in the orchards or regions.

"I'd love to see more young Australians experience regional Australia, meet the people who produce our food and discover communities beyond our capital cities."

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