

Hardworking migrants give firm a fresh opportunity

ERIN JONES



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JOB vacancies for “good, hardworking” people would go largely unfilled at a major horticulture company on the Limestone Coast, if not for migrant and refugee workers.

Holla-Fresh owner Ian Lines said about 20 of his 55-member workforce were Burmese, making up a large part of the company’s operation at Tantanoola – 35km west of Mt Gambier.

“They really do fit the bill of what we’re looking for – good, honest people who just want to do a good day’s work,” Mr Lines said.

“They are reliable and if they weren’t here we’d have vacancies and I’d struggle to fill them.”

The region’s employers often find it difficult to fill horticulture, agriculture, forestry and meat jobs, with migrants often relied on for the roles.

Teys Australia’s Naracoorte abattoir also has 127 migrant workers, mainly from the Philippines, China and New Zealand, among its 518-strong workforce.

Mr Lines said boosting the migrant population helped small country towns survive, which in turn created additional jobs. “But it’s critical to place migrants in the right areas,” he said.

“At the moment they’re placed in larger country towns and the smaller towns, like Millicent, are dying.”

The Federal Government last month announced \$19.5 million in funding to attract skilled workers to the regions.

Ther Eh settled in Mt Gambier in 2007 after fleeing the Burmese military and spending 15 years in a Thailand refugee camp.

“I like Mt Gambier, it’s a small town and not too busy. I like the employment, there’s education for our children and more opportunities,” he said.

Ther and his friend, Hsar Mu Htaw, both work at Holla-Fresh and have bought houses in Mt Gambier, where they plan to raise their families.