

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER 2022**HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora and good afternoon, everyone. I'm joined today by our immigration Minister, Michael Wood, as we announce a further step in our plan to help relieve workforce shortages: something New Zealand is experiencing along with the rest of the world, and a result of our strong economic recovery from COVID, and delivery of near-record low unemployment.

First though, the week ahead: I'm in the House tomorrow, before heading to the top of the South for visits on Thursday, and then back in Wellington on Friday.

Turning to today's announcement, the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme or RSE scheme is an important immigration programme that boosts our seasonal agricultural workforces during busy periods of planting, harvesting, packing, and pruning. It's also a scheme designed to work alongside our Pacific neighbours. It's been in place since the fifth Labour Government introduced it in 2007, and at that time it had a cap of 5,000 workers to help both the horticulture and viticultural sectors; and also, it supported up to nine Pacific countries, allowing workers to stay and work in New Zealand for seven to nine months.

The cap of those workers has been increased most years to support our expanding productive sectors, with our agricultural exports now bringing home record export earnings worth over \$50 billion last year.

Even over the past couple of years with border closures due to COVID, we've continued to increase the cap to the 16,000 that it is now. With RSE workers the largest economic base class of border exceptions during 2021, an allowance is made for those already in the country to remain.

We know that there are acute workforce pressures on these sectors at the moment that will only intensify further come summer. And at the same time, many of our Pacific neighbours are keen to see the RSE scheme strengthened. Already we have the Green List "Straight to Residence" pathway open, making it easier and quicker for an employee to bring in essential skills, especially in the areas where we have gaps. We have confirmed the reopening of the Pacific Access Category, and we continue to see great progress in the 2021 Resident Visa; meaning over 100,000 visas granted to workers in the areas of health, construction, teaching, and many others.

Over the last year, we've received over 30,499 working holiday applications, and those numbers are continuing to rise. Already, over 6,200 working holiday makers are in the country, which is double the number we had in October last year, and with people-to-people movement increasing we remain confident that these numbers will only further increase as we approach summer.

Today, though, I can announce that following discussions with the sectors, unions, and officials, the Government will increase the RSE cap by 3,000 places to 19,000 for the 2022-23 year. This represents a 19 percent increase on the previous cap, and is the largest annual increase in over a decade.

Currently, nearly 6,000 RSE workers are present in New Zealand, and when the cap adjusts in mid-October, there is potential for the sector to access its largest Pacific workforce ever this summer.

But with more workers comes more responsibility; and rightly so. I'm going to hand over to Minister Wood to outline what steps we're taking to continue to ensure RSE workers are well supported, which is incredibly important to this Labour Government.

Minister.

Hon Michael Wood: Well, thank you, Prime Minister, and given recent issues that have been raised around the treatment of some RSE workers, it's been extremely important to me and the Government that we ensure good care for the workers who do come to our country to do this important work.

And so, with the support of the sector, we're introducing a new right to provide sick leave to RSE workers as a prorated entitlement. That comes on top of employer responsibilities we've previously introduced: to pay workers at least \$22.10 an hour—which is above the minimum wage; to offer a minimum of 30 hours per week; and to make available appropriate pastoral care, which includes food, shelter, clothing, and access to health services and suitable accommodation at a reasonable cost.

We continue to work urgently with the industry and unions on further short-term improvements and employee safeguards to provide greater protection to workers. This work is in addition to our wider policy review to improve the RSE scheme for workers that we've previously signalled will start in early 2023.

It's important to point out that the cap decision that the Prime Minister has just announced and the improvements that we're announcing today have been worked out through a tripartite process involving both employer groups and unions working together at the table to ensure that there is a worker voice in these discussions.

All of this comes as the sector makes good progress on growing a local workforce as well, with nearly 10,000 New Zealanders attracted into food and fibre jobs over the past few years, through our Opportunity Grows Here campaign and primary sector workforce programme.

Later this week, upon receiving the Education and Workforce Committee inquiry into migrant exploitation, the House will debate the 11 recommendations made to the Government with the aim of further strengthening the rights and experiences of our migrant workforce in New Zealand, which will build on much work that the Government has done over the past three years. Some further measures we are taking to address migrant exploitation will be released later this week by Minister Priyanca Radhakrishnan.

Thank you all, and very happy to take any questions now.

PM: Feel free.

Media: There are widespread concerns that the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme is akin to modern-day slavery. Every day we're seeing new reports of workers living in squalid conditions, of their employers unfairly charging them. There's concerns here you're ramping the scheme up without carrying out this review.

Hon Michael Wood: Well, I think that would be a fair critique if all that we were doing was to increase the numbers within the cap. What we are doing at the same time as this is having employers and unions representing that workforce sitting down and working together to improve conditions. And one of the clear areas that has been identified in the work is further work on accommodation. That will include both ensuring that we have a suitable standard in place that can be enforced against, and also doing work and receiving advice on how we can as quickly as possible ensure that good standards in terms of insulation, warmth, and suitable personal space can be built into RSE accommodation.

Media: Can you guarantee none of these extra 3,000 workers are going to be exploited?

Hon Michael Wood: Well, look, that is absolutely what we are focused on. As I said, for the first time ever in this process we've had a tripartite process where we've had a voice for workers in developing what we are putting forward, in terms of the cap and in terms of improvements. So, as a part of this, for example, we've talked about trialling—in a couple of the regions—having a roving workplace rep where there'll be a worker who's actually able to be there as a direct representative going about workplaces raising issues and feeding through any concerns. So we're really working on a robust regime here to make sure that in amongst other New Zealand workplaces we don't have any cases of exploitation.

Media: And the Greens have said today there's no way that this would be allowed to be taking place if these workers were white. Do they have a point?

Hon Michael Wood: No—no. Look, I don't accept that. We have a very firm view, as a Government, that right across New Zealand workplaces it is unacceptable for any migrant to be exploited. Sadly, we have had that in the past. That's why our Government's invested \$50 million to crack down on migrant exploitation; that's why we've set up a migrant exploitation visa; that's why we've set up an 0800 number for reporting concerns in this area; that's why we've given both the immigration department and the Labour Inspectorate more powers to work together to crack down on migrant exploitation; and that's why we're improving conditions in the RSE area. So I don't take a backward step in terms of the work that we're doing to stamp out migrant exploitation.

PM: Keep in mind, the RSE scheme was always designed to be of benefit both for the workers and, of course, for New Zealand industry. We've got to make sure that with any increase, we're continuing to ensure that it truly is beneficial to workers, including making sure that where we have seen exploitation and poor treatment—and we have—that we absolutely act on it. I reject the idea, at all, that we take lightly those issues. Our job is to ensure, as it always has been, when this scheme was established—to make sure that it benefits the worker and not just the employer.

Media: Prime Minister, earlier this year you pushed back against expansion, saying Pacific countries told you they didn't have any workers to give; they wanted to retain their workers. What's changed?

PM: Yeah. Just to be clear, of course, that will be specific to each individual country. So some have said, "As we reopen, we want to be careful that we've got the workforce we need." And we're really clear, the RSE scheme was designed to be beneficial for them, and still could be; we just have to make sure in the selection process of which workers were coming, it was those more inclined to be potentially unemployed in their home country, rather than necessarily skilled individuals that they may need to remain. Keep in mind, there's different numbers for different countries, as well.

Media: Prime Minister, Sean Plunket has said that the Christchurch terrorist is not a terrorist; that he's a nutter with a gun, but not a terrorist. Are you comfortable with your Ministers appearing on his show?

PM: I'm not going to get into what I consider to be a misguided publicity stunt, and so that means that I'm not going to give much comment on the accusations that have been made.

Media: Are you comfortable with your Ministers being on his show?

PM: I believe that this is a publicity stunt and the best way to deal with that is to not engage with it.

Media: But he's said something that's been reasonably offensive to those—

PM: And do you know, I couldn't tell you who's been on the show or who's scheduled to be. I think the most important substantive point here is I think this is someone seeking publicity, and I don't want to be involved in that.

Media: Now that he's said that, and made a play at publicity, will you make a ruling as to whether your Ministers should, going forward, be on the show?

PM: I've given you my answer.

Media: Prime Minister, just a couple of questions in regards to Today FM's ram raids doco that came out today. Is Oranga Tamariki failing tamariki in their care after one of them told Today FM as part of that doco that they were so uncomfortable in Oranga Tamariki's care that they found comfort in crime?

PM: No one should feel comfort in crime, and we should always make sure that we're doing everything we can to prevent someone being in Oranga Tamariki care in the first place. And so those are two things that have been an incredible focus for us as a Government—particularly preventing children entering care, because it is not the best option for children or, indeed, their primary caregivers.

The second point I'd make is that you've already seen us put in place—when we've seen young people who have been engaging in this kind of activity, particularly when they've been younger, they automatically go on to a process where we're looking at every element of their lives and engagement with schooling; the care they're receiving; the relationships they might have with OT or with their caregivers, to make sure that we're really intensively working with those, particularly children, where we've seen this kind of offending. Because it's indicative—you don't have children taking part in this kind of offences without there being something seriously wrong going on in their lives.

Media: And does it suggest to you, though, that, I guess, what is going on in some Oranga Tamariki care is basically a catalyst, I guess, for want of a better description, for some of what we are actually seeing out there in the public from these kids?

PM: One of the things I think you've already seen from police is them talking very openly about what they see as some of the common themes: disengagement with education or training, often high levels of dysfunction at home. Often we see one of the main features being that these are children that are often engaged with Oranga Tamariki, and there'll be a number of reasons for that. I don't think any of this will come as a surprise. The issue for us is: how do we treat the core issues here? How do we start preventing young people from engaging in these kinds of activities? And the fourth, perhaps newer element that they're seeing is the role of social media throughout as well—harder to address, but a more common theme as well.

Media: And also 500 business, roughly, are eligible for that Crime Prevention Fund. Obviously, we're seeing five have had security upgrades, and I understand a further five are under way. Is that good enough?

PM: So that's completed installation, as far as I understand. Even then, regardless, we do want those numbers to ramp up, and faster. We've made provision for up to 500. That's because we do want to reach a larger number of small businesses. Again, when it comes to getting that scaled up quickly, I know Minister Hipkins certainly asked the police to work as quickly as they can to support business.

Media: Is part of the problem, though, the fact that businesses can't apply? It's actually police identifying and going to those businesses. Isn't that a bit of an administrative nightmare?

PM: I think one of the issues, as well, would just be, of course, we want to make sure that whatever investment is being made, that it is going to address and prevent repeat issues, and so undertaking an assessment for each individual business will probably also be at play. But again, probably in terms of the operational side, worth talking to Minister Hipkins. I know it's something he's keeping a close eye on.

Media: You're comfortable with the speed with which this is being rolled out?

PM: No, no—I'd like it to happen faster as well, but I'm also aware that we want to make sure that the police are given the ability to do it properly, too.

Media: Prime Minister, President Joe Biden is going to hold the first ever US Indo-Pacific summit in Washington over the next couple of days. How does New Zealand feel about a stronger US presence in the Indo-Pacific, perhaps to counter China's?

PM: I think any engagement with our region needs to be because of the relationship between that country and the Pacific. It should never be as a response to anyone else's activity. As you will have heard me say many times before, that regardless of the nation or the Government that's engaging in our region, the most important thing is that it's on the

region's terms. The Pacific has already said their number one security issue—in fact, the number one issue generally for our region—is climate change. And so I know that's their ask of anyone who chooses to engage in our backyard.

Media: Prime Minister, the maternal birth injury reading is on its third reading at the moment. If that passes, how significant will that be for parents, and was there any thought on making that retrospective for people who might be going through those injuries right now?

PM: You know, this is a significant change, and I think it's part of a wider piece of work to ensure that ACC is responding to all of New Zealand's population. You know, when you do a bit of analysis, you can see that there are some areas that we needed to ensure that it was more responsive. One thing I would say is that as a Government, we want to make sure that the first stages of a child's life and a family's life together is the best it can possibly be. The process of a child entering into the world, for the most part, is a joyous time, but it can also be quite a traumatic time for women. One thing we can ease is making sure that they are well supported in their recovery if they are someone who experiences a traumatic birth. The next step, of course, is to ensure we continue to strengthen maternal mental health. It's another challenging area that we know we have work to do.

Media: It feels like there's a bit of a turning point at the moment in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The defence Minister—you've announced new sanctions today, obviously. The defence Minister says New Zealand can't give more lethal aid because the match isn't quite there with what they're asking for and what New Zealand has.

PM: In terms of physical immediate supply.

Media: Sure. Well, I might then invite you to speak on whether there's anything else you can give militarily, and also why not give more financially?

PM: Yeah. So what the Minister of Defence will have been referring to is that in many of those immediate asks, often they're things that, if we were to procure, it would take years. So that's why Ukraine is often seeking immediate supply. That's more likely to be able to be provided from, essentially, larger States and therefore larger military and military resource. That hasn't stopped us providing military aid. We've done that, however, in partnering with others. But there are other areas where we can probably provide much more immediate response, and that's what we've been looking to do. One thing I can say is that it was of note when I sat down with the Ukrainian Prime Minister—he commented on the fact that we had been there very early, very quickly, and that we were being very practical in our support, including training Ukrainian volunteers.

OK, Jo. If there's nothing else, we might finish up with you.

Media: Last week, when Minister Robertson was filling in for you, he spoke about the number of security concerns in terms of threats against MPs and him having to up his own, I guess, DPS protection when he's been out at public events. There was some consideration given to whether how you campaign next year might actually change in terms of more walkabouts and things. How are you feeling at the moment in terms of your own safety, and how much do you think you might have to change up the campaign next year because of it?

PM: Yeah. I think it's too early to say. We've got up to a year before we're at the acute end of that issue, and when I think back across the last couple of months we've seen quite a change even in that period of time. Honestly, the period from the moment we started vaccinating people was when I saw a bit of change in activity around some of our activity as politicians, but since that time it's also changed, so I think it would be a bit premature to give too much comment on it. But this is an issue that, regardless of what the issue of the day is, there's a mindfulness of what's going on in our environment, so that's always been the case.

Media: Minister Robertson talked about the threats being greater and more intense, but is your impression that they've actually subsided?

PM: Oh, in comparison to, for instance, even seven months ago. That's not to say that it's not still present; it's just it's a bit different even than it was a few months ago. So it's one of those things that's a very dynamic environment, and we're not the only ones. In conversations I've had with other leaders, they've seen that pattern quite reflective of what's happened with the pandemic, which is an interesting observation as well.

Yeah, I might then finish just with Jenna and then with Ben.

Media: He said—talking about the walkabouts—that he didn't want to let those people win. Is that something that you're mindful of?

PM: No, I don't think—look, again, the issue I guess he'll be responding to is making sure that we continue to be accessible. That is something that we want to make sure that we are. That's one of the benefits of New Zealand politics. As politicians, we are accessible and we want that to continue. But, again, I think it's too early to say what that's going to look like in a year's time, and I'd still like to think that I'm pretty accessible.

Media: On Saturday at the United Nations, a few speeches before you, the Vanuatu President issued a rallying call to sign up to the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. I'm looking at you and you're suggesting you might not have caught that or—

PM: No. Most of my engagement with Vanuatu has been on their advisory opinion through the ICJ on redress on emissions. That's not an issue I've engaged in directly nor that I've had an ask on.

Media: Has there been a—I remember the last time we talked about the ICJ opinion was in Fiji. It was a big issue around the Pacific Islands Forum.

Prime Minister: Yeah. Vanuatu's really picked up the mantle on it at the moment, but again, there's a bit of work that they're doing in preparation, but we're working closely with them. We're very supportive of it—yeah.

Excellent. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference