

A new harvest for Pacific workers



MARC McCORMACK

Kanaka descendant Charlie Darby, at Tully yesterday, is supportive of the trial of South Pacific Islander cane harvesters

SARAH ELKS

NORTH QUEENSLAND REPORTER

CHARLIE Darby's grandfather was one of 60,000 South Sea Islanders dragged to Queensland as slaves to toil in the canefields in the late 1800s.

Fast-forward more than a century and a new generation of workers from nine Pacific Island nations will have the chance to follow in their ancestors' footsteps, albeit by choice and with Australian-standard wages.

It's part of a three-year trial by the federal government for Pacific seasonal workers in the labour-starved cotton and cane sectors and 57-year-old Mr Darby reckons it's not a bad idea.

His grandfather was "black-birded" from the tiny Vanuatu island of Ambrym to work near Hervey Bay, cutting cane by hand. The practice ended in 1901 with the introduction of the White Australia Policy and most of the islanders, known as Kanakas, were repatriated.

Mr Darby's grandfather started a family in Australia and his grandson began cutting cane near Childers before moving north to work on banana farms at Tully.

"I like the idea," he said. "They will be working under proper conditions and want to start a new life by working in Australia."

"The cane industry was built on the backs of South Sea Islanders."

It was difficult for canegrowers to attract local workers during the harvest, because the work was temporary and hard.

Canegrowers chief executive Steve Greenwood said the local workforce was being poached by the mining sector.

"We need more workers during harvest, from May through to November," Mr Greenwood said.

"When you're talking about a crop of about 30 million tonnes of cane across Australia, that's a lot of material to move."

He said canegrowers needed workers to drive tractors through the cane paddocks, picking up the harvested cane, ready for transport to sugar mills.

It would not take long to train someone in the necessary skills to work in the industry, which is worth about \$2.5 billion to the economy and employs 15,600 people. "We've been lobbying for this," he said. "We've got a deficit of about 500 workers every year and that's across the 4000 farms in Australia."

And as for a connection to the Kanakas of old, Mr Greenwood said that was drawing a long bow.

The cane and cotton scheme follows the successful program employing seasonal Pacific workers in horticulture, which had suffered from labour shortages, costing growers \$100,000 per crop each year in rotting fruit.

That program will become permanent from next July.

THE NATION 7

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN, DECEMBER 24-25, 2011
www.theaustralian.com.au