QUEENSLAND FARMERS' FEDERATION

Food Supply Chain **Capacity Study**

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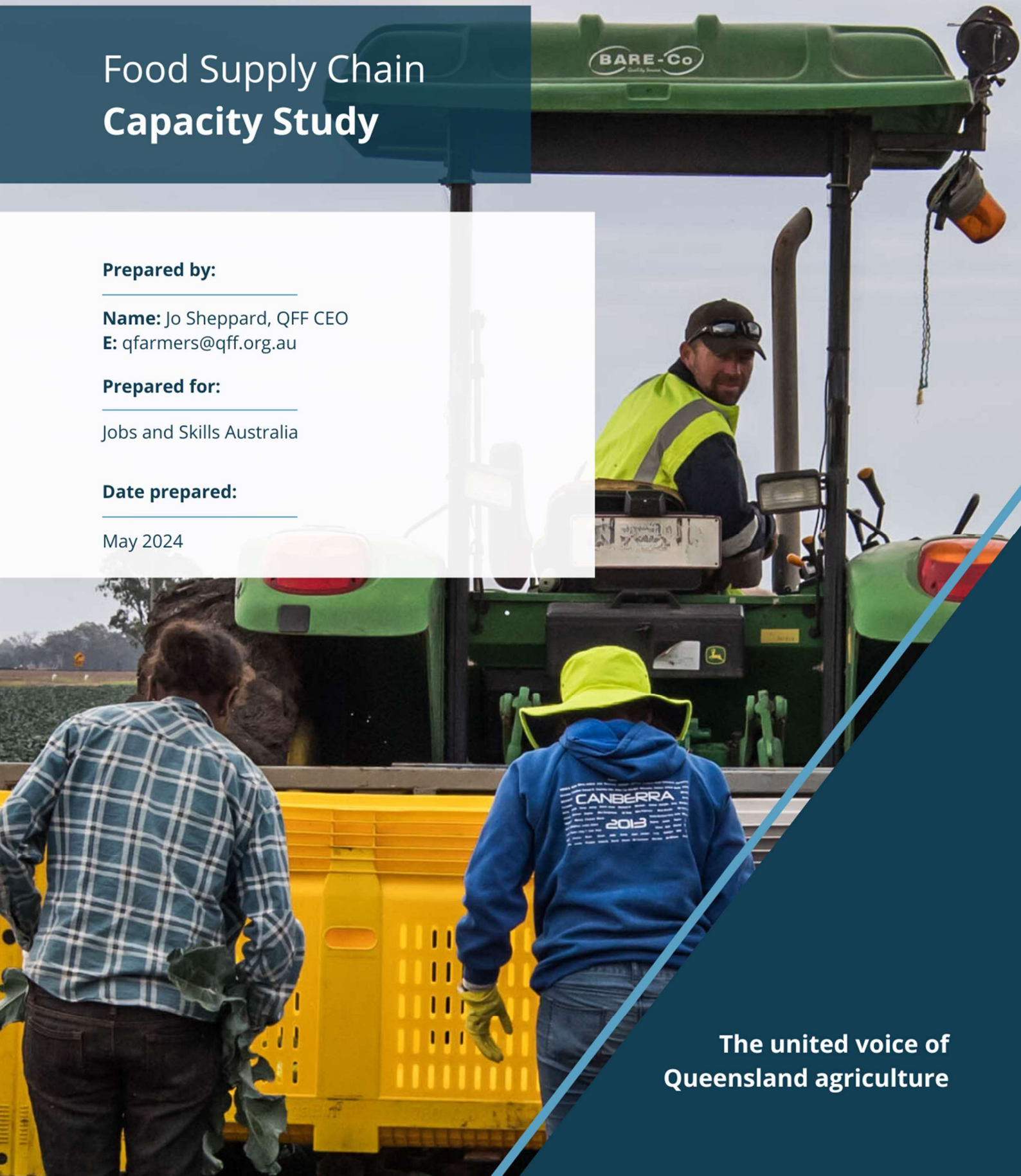

The united voice of Queensland agriculture

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This submission is provided to:

Jobs and Skills Australia

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Our members

- Canegrowers
- Cotton Australia
- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland
- eastAUSmilk
- Australian Cane Farmers Association
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Queensland Chicken Meat Council
- Pork Queensland
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd
- Fairburn Irrigation Network
- Mallawa Irrigation
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd
- Theodore Water Pty Ltd
- Eton Irrigation
- Queensland Oyster Growers Association
- Lockyer Water Users Forum

About the Queensland Farmers' Federation

The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.

We are a member-based organisation representing the interests of peak agriculture industry organisations (both state and national). Through our members, QFF represents more than 13,000 primary producers across the cotton, cane, horticulture, dairy, nursery and garden, poultry, pork, and intensive animal industries.

We unite the sector to engage in a broad range of economic, social, environmental, and regional issues through advocacy, policy development, and project activity. We work with the government of the day on behalf of industry, farmers, and the community to provide powerful representation and contribution to the policy direction, sustainability, and future growth of Queensland's agriculture sector.

Our Council of member representatives and policy committees set the strategic priorities for policy development and advocacy, while our Board ensures our corporate governance.

QFF draws on the expertise and industry knowledge of our members, and through our commitment to collaboration and considered policy development, we lead Queensland's agriculture sector towards a strong future, ensuring our members are ahead of the game and have a voice at the table on the issues that matter to their members.

Submission

QFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Food Supply Chain Capacity Study.

We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

Position

This study by Jobs and Skills Australia aims to identify barriers and opportunities which enhance workforce participation, retention, and career progression, drawing insights from existing domestic and international successes. QFF welcome the opportunity to provide feedback upon addressing education and training barriers, to ensure the development of a sustainable and resilient food supply chain workforce. QFF applauds and encourages further consultation regarding these RJSA issues, to uphold Australia's status as a leading producer of quality food while minimising disruptions to domestic food security. QFF's views and recommendations on the issues raised within the discussion paper can be summarised by the following:

- Food security will remain a priority through each aspect of the supply chain.
- The adoption of new technology must be balanced with job transfer, skills transfer is crucial to protect the well-being and livelihoods of workers.
- Accurate evaluation of existing workforce capabilities and infrastructure is vital for effective deployment of new technologies.
- The education and training system's effectiveness in responding to technological changes relies on streamlining legislative processes and updating curriculum through consultation with relevant stakeholders.

- Major challenges in developing and maintaining a skilled food supply chain workforce include a lack of flexibility in training programs, seasonality of workforce demands, and cost of training in rural regions.
- VET programs do not align 100% with industry needs, leading to low completion rates, with financial barriers and lack of support systems contributing to dropouts.
- Mismatch between ANZSCO codes and the evolving labour market needs challenges immigration, outdated codes not accurately reflecting diverse skill sets and qualifications.
- Government surge capacity for managing biosecurity incursions is limited, financial support for extra workers is crucial.
- Addressing data gaps is important for workforce planning, market access, and tracking, necessitating collaboration among stakeholders.

Demand and Supply

QFF are supportive of identifying longer term trends and drivers of workforce pressures across the supply chain. Demand and supply in itself encompass the entirety of the supply chain, including regional development, and are intrinsically linked with long-term viability of the workforce.

"What impact will innovation and technology have on the size, composition future skills needs and productivity of the workforce? What are they key barriers and enablers to innovation and technology adoptions?"

The impact of innovation and technology on the agricultural workforce is poised to be significant. The development of technology, both on farm and regionally (energy and infrastructure) such as precision agriculture, drones, and sensors will enable farmers to make data-driven decisions, optimising resource allocation and crop management. Developments in robotics and automation have the potential to streamline labour-intensive tasks, reducing reliance on manual labour and mitigating workforce shortages. Smart irrigation systems and climate monitoring technologies will also help farmers adapt to changing global environmental conditions, improving water efficiency and resilience to climate variability.

The advancement of technology and introduction of agritech on farm must be balanced with job and skills transfer between old and new technology/workforce roles. It will be crucial in the coming years to balance these advantages with the well-being of agricultural workers. As automation and robotics streamline operations and decrease the need for manual labour, there is a risk of displacing workers, if those willing to upskill are not provided with the proper support, access and resources. To address this challenge, it's essential to prioritise strategies that ensure a smooth transition for workers, such as upskilling and reskilling programs tailored to emerging roles within the agricultural sector. QFF urge the government to proactively plan for this advancing change in the national workforce across all industries, but in particular agriculture, to safeguard the nation's food security.

A major factor influencing the adoption of new technology is the long asset life of farm machinery, particularly mobile machinery. Replacement of old equipment with new technologies like battery electric or hydrogen fuel cells will take time to propagate through the national farm fleet in Australia. Given that most farm equipment is imported, primarily from major US or European manufacturers, government engagement is crucial to understand the development plans and timelines of these new technologies. The modification of engine infrastructure is not instantaneous, and the current timeline for such modifications remains uncertain. Proactive planning, including forward estimates of vehicle replacement strategies, is essential as the industry transitions. Many producers also rely on local networks of dealers and mechanics for maintenance and repair services. A lack of local

expertise in maintaining and repairing new technology systems, coupled with competition from existing energy sources/services, underscores the need for significant investment by manufacturers and governments, into relevant technical and vocational training initiatives. By embracing technology while simultaneously investing in the professional development and livelihoods of agricultural workers, Australia can navigate the transition towards a more technologically advanced and socially equitable agricultural industry.

Evaluating existing workforce capabilities and infrastructure in different regions is vital for effective deployment of new technologies. For example, the reliable delivery and storage of diesel through regional networks across the country is currently well-established. Any switch to an alternative fuel or energy sources will require guaranteed and secure production, distribution, and storage infrastructure before it is widely adopted. The risk of supply interruption is a major deterrent to all stakeholders along the food supply chain from adopting alternative technologies. Food security will always remain priority. Pilot programs will play a crucial role in implementing new technologies and business models whilst instilling trust in producers and users. Early collaboration with producers, consideration of workforce and skills availability, and seamless integration with existing supply chains are critical for the success of these green initiatives.

Education and Training – Participation and Progression

Barriers

The agricultural sector faces numerous challenges in developing and maintaining a skilled workforce that can meet the evolving needs of modern agriculture. In response to the discussion question of the challenges faced by students, employers, and providers of education and training in the agricultural workforce, it's essential to understand key issues such as the lack of flexibility in training programs, the seasonality of workforce demands, and the cost of training and accreditation. By understanding and addressing these challenges, the government, together with relevant stakeholders, can work towards building a more resilient and skilled agricultural workforce that can drive innovation and sustainability in the industry.

Seasonality of Workforce:

Agriculture is inherently seasonal, with fluctuating demands for labour throughout the year based on factors such as planting, harvesting, and livestock management cycles. This seasonality poses challenges for both employers and workers, especially those in the horticultural industry, as it leads to periods of high demand for labour followed by periods of low demand or downtime. To address this challenge, it's essential to ensure that workers possess skills (or are aided in learning skills) that are transferrable across different agricultural tasks and industries. This flexibility allows workers to adapt to changing demands and employment opportunities throughout the year, reducing the impact of seasonality on workforce stability and productivity.

Lack of Flexibility in Training Programs:

Many training programs in the agricultural sector lack flexibility. The rigid structure of some programs may not accommodate the diverse needs and schedules of individuals, particularly those who may be working in the industry while seeking further education or training. This creates difficulties for workers and students, as well as for employers who need to ensure their workforce receives training without disrupting operations. Additionally, training providers in rural areas may struggle to offer a variety of programs that cater to the varying needs of students and employers due to lack of resources, further exacerbating the issue.

Cost of Training in Rural Regions:

The cost of training in rural regions can be a significant barrier for both workers and employers. It is imperative training costs in these rural areas are comparable to those in major regional centres, for those who may struggle to afford training programs or access quality training providers. The distribution of assessors and training resources in rural and remote areas further compound the issue, as access to timely and affordable training becomes increasingly difficult for small businesses to continue.

Education and Training

QFF are concerned regarding the Federal Government's use of Vocational Education and Training (VET) completion rates as an indicator for industries in the context of essential skills visa pathways. This approach overlooks the underlying reasons for low completion rates and is being used to limit access to skilled migrants. QFF cautions against the removal of VET courses purely based upon student completion rates and urges the government to take a broader view of improving VET courses, including giving due consideration to the below potential reasons for low completion rates:

- Course Design and Relevance: VET programs may not be fully aligned with current industry needs, leading to low student engagement and completion. The courses are often in class and used to keep students busy and out of trouble, therefore not always effectively targeting the correct audience doing the course.
- Financial Barriers: The cost of VET programs can be a challenge for some students, impacting completion rates.
- Support Systems: Lack of adequate support services for students throughout the program contributes to dropouts.
- Alternative Pathways: Some students might opt for university degrees or on-the-job training instead of VET programs.

There are many areas which warrant focus before more serious actions such as cancelling VET courses are established. QFF urges the government to focus upon the following:

- Focus on Skills Assessments: Utilise skills assessments to identify qualified individuals, regardless of their completion of a specific VET program.
- Prioritise Employer Involvement: Engage employers in developing and delivering VET programs that are directly relevant to their industry needs.
- Invest in Support Services: Provide financial aid, career counselling, and other support structures to help students succeed in their VET programs
- Promotion of the agriculture industry as a potential future employment pathway in schools should also be stepped up.

VET and Technology

"How effectively is the education and training system responding to changes in technology, business structures and other developments? What is the impact of Australia's research and development workforce?"

In recent decades, the agricultural industry has experienced significant growth, embracing advanced technologies. This evolution has elevated skill levels across various domains, including technology, quality control, and biosecurity. Modern farm management systems demonstrate a blend of leadership prowess and value chain strategies, reflecting the sector's commitment to excellence (AUSVEG, 2019; Queensland Farmers' Federation, 2018).

The effectiveness of the education and training system in responding to changes in technology, business structures, and other developments is contingent upon several factors, including legislative processes, the transfer of knowledge from people who have the ability to deliver training, technological uptake, and pilot programs aimed at innovation and sustainability. The first hurdle for most developments in industry is that any advancements in technology, education and training must navigate legislative processes and bureaucratic red tape. Streamlining these processes is crucial to ensure that new technologies and knowledge can be integrated efficiently into training packages and curriculum. This involves updating curriculum and training materials to reflect the latest advancements in agricultural technology and practices. It also requires ongoing professional development and consultation so educators to stay abreast of these developments.

Migration

The seasonal and casual demand requirements, especially during peak harvest periods, vary significantly depending on climatic factors, the specific crops and the locations of the businesses but have been mostly satisfied by the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program, the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). QFF's main concern in migration connecting to the workforce and wider food supply chain is the current ANZSCO codes. The ANZSCO (Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations) codes serve as a vital tool for categorising and classifying occupations in Australia, facilitating various functions such as immigration, workforce planning, and statistical analysis. However, despite their utility, ANZSCO codes can sometimes present challenges, particularly concerning immigration.

One key issue is the mismatch between ANZSCO codes and the rapidly evolving nature of the labour market. As industries evolve and new occupations emerge, the existing ANZSCO codes may not accurately reflect these changes. This discrepancy can create confusion and uncertainty, especially for immigrants seeking to work in occupations that do not neatly fit into existing classifications.

The specificity of ANZSCO codes can also be limiting, as they may not adequately capture the diverse skill sets and job responsibilities within certain occupations and may overlook the value of transferable skills and qualifications obtained outside of Australia. This can affect immigrants who may have valuable expertise and experience but struggle to demonstrate alignment with specific ANZSCO classifications, leading to situations where individuals with relevant experience and qualifications are unable to secure visas due to discrepancies between their job titles and the ANZSCO classifications. The process of determining visa eligibility based on ANZSCO codes can be complex and time-consuming, involving extensive documentation and verification procedures. This bureaucratic burden can deter skilled workers from considering Australia as a viable destination for immigration, potentially exacerbating skill shortages in key industries.

Overall, while ANZSCO codes play a crucial role in Australia's immigration system, their limitations and potential for misalignment with the evolving labour market underscore the need for ongoing review and adaptation. By addressing these issues and ensuring greater flexibility and responsiveness in visa processing, Australia can better harness the skills and talents of immigrants to drive economic growth and innovation.

- Recognise Diverse Pathways: Acknowledge alternative forms of acquiring essential skills, such as on-the-job training or experience in other countries (with proper accreditation).

- Develop policies that promote social integration and reduce potential exploitation of migrant workers.

Biosecurity skills and workers

Robust biosecurity protocols and proactive planning are vital for a secure supply chain. In the event of a disease outbreak where the workforce is not given careful consideration, training and reassurance as to their safety, a major weakness in the supply chain remains if workers cannot or will not continue work. This is particularly true for the many sectors of the industry which rely on international labour, and as such, communication with and biosecurity training of this workforce is essential for the smooth running of the supply chain.

Supply chains are generally bound by quality assurance systems and market requirements and as such possess fairly high biosecurity standards. Biosecurity requirements add extra cost to delivering the final product to producers but it is a non-negotiable part of the supply chain. Workers in the supply chain are most commonly trained through in house biosecurity programs and available VET programs. However a lack of VET programs being delivered rurally because providers do not find it profitable, creates a gap in the nation's biosecurity preparedness. In a disease outbreak, there will be extra requirements caused by the response and workers need to be equipped with knowledge of the biosecurity system in order to contribute to the response.

Opportunities

"What does a well-prepared surge workforce look like for managing biosecurity incursions? What can be learned from previous incursions?"

Government surge capacity is extremely limited. They have the workforce numbers but not the skills or training. Well run agribusinesses do not generally have spare capacity, if they can retain their usual staff on business as usual during incursions, they are a valuable source for that property. Even so, workers will not likely be able to assist cross farms due to quarantine periods. If contractors are available, they may be utilised during this scenario but not all industries and states work the same way.

"Are there further opportunities to build on synergies between the food supply chain workforce and biosecurity workforce in times of increased need, such as a national food safety incident or biosecurity incursion?"

It is essential that workforce capacity is accurately identified. As majority of agribusinesses run on tight margins, the only way to increase business capacity is for government to financially support extra workers.

Data and Information

The management of data and information within Australia's food supply and agriculture sector presents several challenges and opportunities. The gaps are many, compounded by the involvement of numerous stakeholders, each with different structures and variables, leading to complex and mixed datasets. Varying privacy policies further exacerbate these challenges, creating inconsistencies in data management practices.

The significance of addressing these data gaps cannot be overstated, as they are essential for workforce planning, market access, and tracking, particularly in the context of future sustainability standards and certification. To facilitate progress in this area, the government has a crucial role to play in convening major stakeholders for discussions and facilitating collaboration. Peak industry bodies, such as QFF, will be instrumental in understanding and communicating farmers' attitudes and positions on data management issues.

While the proposal to utilise ATO data to address these gaps could aid in rectifying multiple of these data gaps, QFF cautions against not using de-identified data. This precaution is particularly relevant for farming properties and their landholders, given the recent increase in animal and climate activism, which poses a real threat to agricultural producers' safety and livelihoods.

Summary

Australia's food supply chain faces many challenges when it comes to the national workforce and it will continue to evolve in the changing technological landscape. QFF are keen to participate in further discussions around how both government and industry can best support all stakeholders in the food supply chain.

Yours sincerely

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