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PRESS RELEASE

WELFARE AND WELLBEING OF SAMOAN SEASONAL WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

In light of the concerning number of unsubstantiated information being circulated via various social platforms, the Ministry of Commerce Industry & Labour (MCIL) offers its utmost assurance that the immediate safety, welfare and wellbeing of Samoan citizens engaged under temporary labour mobility schemes continues to be of paramount importance. This has always been, and remains a coordinated and highly invested multi-stakeholder effort, including the Samoan Country Liaison Officer, Samoa Head of Mission & Consulate in Australia, Government of Australia and various Australian based agencies as well as local communities.

COVID 19 Pandemic and Safe Return Home

The sudden devastating impacts of the COVID-19 (2019) outbreak resulted in a lot of uncertainty for seasonal workers in Australia but also for families, especially as a result of the international border closures and flight restrictions. For Virgin Airline, workers with tickets paid in 2019 and early 2020 were advised of airlines' decisions to keep these as credits for a certain period. In the absence of Virgin's international services, Qantas and Air NZ were still servicing both chartered and periodic commercial repatriation flights until borders officially opened in August 2022. This was a huge undertaking coordinated by the Samoa Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Samoa Head of Mission and Consulate in Australia, with support from the Samoa Country Liaison Officer. Despite the opportunities made available for passage home, there were also a concerning number of Samoan seasonal workers who opted to disengage from the programme and stay with families and or other contacts, thereby breaching the terms and conditions of their employment visas.

Passports of Samoan Nationals:

Pursuant to Part 8 'Offences and Penalties', Section 37 'Other Offences' of the Samoan Passport Act 2008: it is an offence for any person to seize and retain in their possession a Samoan travel document (passport) against the will of the document holder. This is strictly observed by all Government of Samoa officials in Australia including the Head of Mission and Consulate as well as the Country Liaison Officer. For seasonal worker passports supplied to Country Liaison Officer by either Police or Approved Employers, work is ongoing in locating and assisting the owners. This is further complicated by workers disengaging from the programme and ceasing all contact with government officials.

Message to Seasonal Workers:

Samoan workers engaged in seasonal work in Australia are encouraged to reach out to the Consulate Office in Sydney to share any concerns you may have. In addition to this, there is also an escalation process for the program where multiple stakeholders are acknowledged as critical point of contacts

ranging from Government departments to recognized community connection organizations that have been working collaboratively with Samoa Mission in Australia to deliver welfare Support for all Samoan seasonal workers. For workers who have disengaged and thus overstayed work visas, the process is difficult as the decision for redeployment or re-engagement will be in the hands of the authorities given visa conditions have been breached and can only lead to deportation/redeployment. Our government officers will provide assistance where it can given the limitations on them to intervene where workers have of their own choice, disengaged or absconded without prior notice. Such actions are violations of the law. Nevertheless, our government personnel will be available to assist where they can. Please contact the Consulate office in Sydney **Telephone: +61(2) 9602 1967** to discuss the next steps for your returning home.