



A MULTI-CULTURAL WORKFORCE

Article supplied by Rural Women New Zealand.

The first of June marks the beginning of winter, but it's also one of the biggest days on the calendar for dairy farmers – 'Gypsy Day' – when hundreds of dairy farms change ownership, and herds of cows hit the road.

All across the country cars, trucks, trailers, men, women, children, pets and livestock are on the road. Time to move to greener pastures. New homes. New schools. New jobs. For thousands of people it means a huge upheaval. It can be exciting, sad, refreshing and stressful all at the same time.

But how much more difficult must it be for new migrants who start life afresh in our country, particularly on farms?

Many migrants know no-one when they arrive, apart from their new employer. All will have left behind family and friends. Perhaps in their new home they will not have any near neighbours to meet and welcome them. Perhaps they will be the only new employees, and will have to try and make a place for themselves in already established teams.

In the past year Immigration New Zealand has issued 1644 work visas and permits to individuals to undertake employment on beef and dairy farms throughout the country – an increase of 66 percent on the previous year.

A large number of these migrants work on dairy farms in Canterbury and North Otago. In fact 13 percent of all new migrants live in Canterbury alone and Ashburton's Newcomers' Network and Timaru's Ethnic Council both record upwards of 45 different nationalities in their regions.

But while these workers choose New Zealand with hopes for a better lifestyle and future for their families, they are also vulnerable to the effects of isolation and loneliness and at risk from unscrupulous practices of some overseas recruitment agencies.

Immigration New Zealand fraud officials are currently working with Ashburton Safer Communities Council following revelations that some offshore recruitment agencies have been skimming a fee from migrant workers' pay on an ongoing basis, and illegally

withholding migrants' passports and qualifications. Without these documents these people can be even more isolated, unable to apply for a driver's licence, or leave the country again when they wish. Migrants in turn are wary of speaking out for fear of being sent home.

Community development worker for Ashburton Safer Communities Council, Raewyn Barclay, has urged all concerned migrants to come forward without fear and bring copies of their contracts and documents to her, saying Immigration New Zealand wants to help stamp out worker exploitation, but needs hard evidence.

In response government requirements are being tightened. From May this year anyone providing immigration advice in New Zealand must have a licence from the Immigration Advisers Authority, with offshore advisers coming under the same regime from May 2010.

Groups are also springing up to help. Filipina Belinda Dewe of Timaru has set up the South Canterbury Filipino Association, which has links with a similar Mid Canterbury group.

Interestingly she says that 80 per cent of New Zealand's immigrant farm workers from the Philippines are qualified veterinary surgeons, though most New Zealanders are unaware of the high qualifications many Filipino migrants bring to this country.

On the other hand employers may also be expecting too much of their migrant staff, especially when it comes to machinery.

"You have to understand that most Filipinos have never seen a farm bike, a quad bike or a tractor," says Ms Dewe.

Rural Women New Zealand (RWNZ) has also been raising awareness of the needs of migrants, and earlier this year suggested its members reach out to assist where they could.

One who rallied to the call was Margaret O'Connor, President of RWNZ's Hook branch in South Canterbury. She and journalist Ruth Grundy set out to interview migrant dairy workers around the Glenavy area to find out how they were faring.

"All the migrants we interviewed were happy," says Mrs O'Connor. "But there were language problems, particularly understanding our English slang, and some found the winters very cold, particularly those from Brazil."

Mrs O'Connor says it is often the small things that migrant workers

find challenging, tasks like shopping for food when they are unfamiliar with local ingredients and how to cook them. She says they face similar challenges with planting a vegetable garden with different plants.

Mrs O'Connor says the newcomers enrich the district's communities. "They open our eyes up to the rest of the world." She says it is important to respect not just the person, but their culture as well.

Working in with other agencies, many support initiatives have resulted from these interviews. English speaking classes have been arranged with North Otago Literacy for those finding language a problem, while local schools have employed extra teacher aides to help with non-English speaking pupils. Transport to the mobile kindergarten has been organised for pre-schoolers and Waimate District Council has put out information packs for migrants to let them know of local services.

At a community level, multi-cultural pot luck dinners have been held and neighbours have been reminded to be welcoming to new migrants through district newsletters.

Each new person in our community, whether they are New Zealander or immigrant, offers a diversity which adds depth, richness, new life and strength to what we already have. But for communities to truly gain from what these people have to offer, we must welcome and support them, and make it possible for them to actively contribute and participate.

Maybe you could call in and visit with a cheery hello, baking or a casserole. After a couple of days shifting house, it's really nice to have a meal ready and waiting in the fridge that you haven't had to cook yourself! And it's also nice to know that someone actually cares that you've arrived.

In short, let them know that they are welcome and that you are there to help if needed.

