

20 August 2026

The Hon Tony Burke MP
Minister for Home Affairs
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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CC:

The Hon Julie Collins MP, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
The Hon Matt Thistlethwaite MP, Assistant Minister for Immigration

Dear Minister Burke

RE: MINISTERIAL DIRECTION 119 — DAIRY WORKFORCE, FARM SAFETY AND AUSTRALIA'S MILK SECURITY

Australian Dairy Farmers (ADF) is writing to express serious concern about your decision to introduce Ministerial Direction 119 and the consequences it is already having for dairy farmers seeking skilled overseas workers.

The Direction commenced on 25 July 2026 and fundamentally changed the processing priority for skilled visas, including the Skills in Demand subclass 482 visa. It also applies to applications already lodged and awaiting determination.

Under the new arrangements, dairy workers applying from offshore are placed in the fifth and lowest processing priority.

This is a serious policy failure for an industry that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and relies on skilled workers to care for animals and produce fresh food every day.

We recognise the importance of prioritising defence, law enforcement, healthcare, teaching and construction. What we do not accept is the proposition that food production can simply be pushed to the bottom of the list.

Dairy farmers cannot delay milking because a visa has not been processed. They cannot postpone calving, feeding or animal care. When workers are unavailable, the work does not disappear — farmers and any existing employees work longer hours to cover the gap.

That has direct consequences:

- increased fatigue and workplace safety risks;
- greater physical and mental pressure on farmers and employees;
- reduced capacity to manage animal health and welfare;
- lower productivity and increased production costs;
- greater difficulty retaining existing workers; and
- ultimately, pressure on Australia's domestic milk production capacity.

The timing is particularly concerning as many dairy regions enter the intensive spring calving period, when labour requirements are at their highest.

Some small dairy businesses have already spent up to \$12,000 per worker on recruitment, migration and associated costs in good faith, only to have applications already in the system pushed down the processing order by a change they could not have anticipated. We are also aware some larger dairy businesses have already paid upwards of \$54 000, only to be told their workers aren't coming any time soon.

This is not simply an inconvenience. It is a financial and operational risk being transferred directly from government onto farm families.

Farmers are already under enormous pressure

Government cannot consider this decision in isolation from the pressure already being carried by Australian farmers.

The **2026 National Farmer Wellbeing Report**, undertaken across 1,017 Australian farmers, found:

- **54%** had felt depressed or down in the previous two years;
- **one in five** reported poor mental health;
- **one in seven** reported thoughts of self-harm or suicide;
- **41%** had considered leaving farming;
- **91%** felt undervalued by the Australian public; and
- **94%** believed Australia's food security depends on stronger support for farmers and regional communities.

These are not abstract statistics.

Almost one-quarter of farmers reported regularly struggling to cope with the demands of farming, while nearly six in ten were relying on off-farm work or secondary employment to remain financially viable.

Against that background, a Commonwealth decision that makes it harder for farmers to secure workers does not reduce pressure — it adds directly to it.

Australia cannot take milk security for granted

Australia does not have milk security simply because supermarket shelves are stocked today.

Milk security depends on maintaining enough productive dairy farms, cows, skilled workers and processing capacity to supply Australians tomorrow.

A migration policy that makes it harder to obtain skilled dairy workers therefore has consequences well beyond individual visa applications.

At a time when the dairy industry is already dealing with workforce shortages, high costs, processor rationalisation and declining farm numbers, government policy should be protecting domestic production capacity — **not making it harder to maintain it.**

Minister, ADF is asking you to urgently reconsider the treatment of dairy under Direction 119.

Specifically, we ask the Government to:

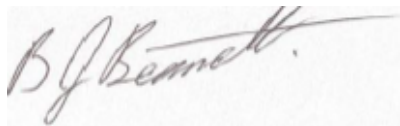
1. **restore priority processing for regional employer-sponsored skilled visa applications;**
2. **provide a specific processing priority for dairy and other essential food-production occupations, including offshore applicants required to fill genuine skills shortages;**
3. **urgently progress dairy applications already lodged before 25 July 2026 rather than allowing them to be pushed behind applications lodged under the new arrangements; and**
4. **work directly with ADF and the agriculture portfolio on migration settings that recognise food production as a national priority.**

The Dairy Industry Labour Agreement exists because government has already accepted that genuine dairy skills shortages cannot always be filled locally. It makes little sense to maintain that pathway while introducing processing settings that make it increasingly difficult for farmers to actually use it.

Food production is essential infrastructure. The people who produce Australia's food should not be treated as the lowest priority when they seek the skilled workers required to keep producing it.

We ask that you urgently review Direction 119 and meet with Australian Dairy Farmers to resolve this issue. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact myself or Stephen Sheridan, CEO, on 0408 664 841.

Yours sincerely,



Ben Bennett
President
Australian Dairy Farmers