

Surge in DAFF staff numbers

ALEXANDRA LASKIE

The number of public servants working for the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has swelled by almost 30 per cent in three years. This is despite the water and environment functions of the former Coalition government's Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment being carved off and handed to the new Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water on July 1, 2022, shortly after Labor came to office.

The departmental shake-up saw staff numbers fall almost 20 per cent, but since then DAFF's headcount has risen more than 27 per cent to 6373 people. A DAFF spokeswoman said almost half of these new workers are frontline or "direct support roles" in the biosecurity and compliance area. The Institute of Public Affairs' head of research, Morgan Begg, said such a substantial increase in the public service was deeply concerning, and followed a similar trend underway at DCCEE, which has

witnessed a 72 per cent increase in staff numbers within three years. "What that indicates to me is that half are not in biosecurity and are involved in direct regulation of our primary industries and they're growing every year," Mr Begg said. "These new employees are chiefly involved in enforcing regulations, and this is critical because our agriculture sector is overregulated as it is. Every new worker added to the department equates to another form to be filled out, another fence that can't be built and

more hassle and stress for our already overburdened ag sector," Mr Begg said. DAFF's headcount has grown by between 3.3 per cent and 9.43 per cent each year since the Albanese Government came to office in 2022. A DAFF spokeswoman said the department was trying to reduce the outsourcing of its core work and to strengthen the capacity of the Australian Public Service. "In 2023-24, the department converted 62 external contractors to APS roles. The conversion target for this financial

year, as outlined in the department's Corporate Plan, is 52," she said. The size of Australia's public service came under increased scrutiny during the election campaign, when it was targeted for cuts of up to 41,000 workers by the Coalition in a bid to fund more than \$8bn in health spending and other commitments. On a per capita basis, Australia has the largest bureaucracy in the world, according to the United Nations' International Labour Organisation that compiles data on 178 countries.

The latest DAFF annual report for 2023-24 shows that the department met almost all of its performance targets, from the finalisation of biosecurity risk assessments within regulatory time frames to the number of biosecurity preparedness exercises completed. But over the last three years there have been few policies — from shuttering the live sheep export trade to water purchases from irrigators in the Murray Darling Basin — the Albanese Government has delivered that have earned the support of the agriculture sector.

Scotch Hill Truffle and Citrus Farm's Ron Geritz and Michelle Jones grow a variety of citrus trees and truffles and also offer accommodation.



CONOR FOWLER

An initial foray into farming on the advice of an accountant has led to more than a decade of success for this Gippsland couple. Former maths and science teachers, Michelle Jones and Ron Geritz, run Scotch Hill, a truffle and citrus farm also offering luxury accommodation at Neerim South. It's been quite a journey for

Learning path leads to success

the dynamic duo, whose first venture into farming was to plant some bircher trees on their land for tax purposes, before growing it into successful business producing about 10,000 trees a year — which saw China come calling. "People in China found us on Google because we were listed number one in Australia

on the internet for red maples, and they were hoping to set up large-scale tree farms in China but they didn't have the knowledge," Ron said. "So we agreed to go have a look and it became a 10-year partnership where we helped them grow a start-up to quite a large company with multiple farms ... (and) we ended up

winning a Westpac Australia China Business Award in 2016." On returning to Australia, they decided they initially wanted to grow something that wasn't as intense and demanding as tree farming, and landed on truffles. While possibly more demanding than they originally

envisaged, Michelle said it's been a really great journey. "It's exciting to be part of an emerging industry. It's very inclusive too because everyone's learning so people are open to sharing know-how and what does and doesn't work for them," Michelle said. Along with truffles they grow various citrus trees, and have planted about 40 cherry trees and about 300 plum trees on their 17ha farm.

Boss calls for 'fibre security'

ALEX SINNOTT

Growing awareness from government over Australia's food security needs to extend to "fibre security", the new boss of the Victorian Forest Products Association says. VFPA chief executive Andrew Smith said agriculture had led the way in showing the need for Australia to source as much of its food domestically as possible, and the same thinking should be applied to forestry by politicians and bureaucrats. Mr Smith said the forestry sector was keen to work with farmers on shared concerns such as fire management. "We're rightfully cautious about outsourcing our food supply — so why are we so willing to do it with timber and the jobs that come with it?" Mr Smith said. "Victoria needs 800,000 new homes in the next decade. Nationally, demand will exceed 2.4 million. But Victoria's timber shortfall alone could leave 76,000 house frames unbuilt. "That's lost jobs, delayed homes and growing dependence on imports. "Farmers get this. You can't plant today and harvest tomorrow. Forestry's the same. And if we don't invest in local processing, we give away the value we've worked to grow."

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