

VOLUNTEER LABOUR CASE STUDY

Ontos farm has been operating as an organic system since 1975. It has been certified by the National Association of Sustainable Agriculture Australia since 1982. A health retreat was operated on the farm between 1987 and 2000. During this time we employed an average of six staff at any one time for the five months of the year we were open. This allowed us to contribute to the local economy and raise a family.

In 2000 a criminally insane man burned the main retreat centre facility and severely injured Fred, the owner, so that he was unable to work for four years. Also at this time his marriage failed and the consequential financial drain put the farm under great duress. In 2008 the owner remarried to a lovely woman who shared the vision of producing healthy food. Several ventures were trialled and garlic was settled on. Fred and Neroli, partners, friends and husband and wife have been producing around two tonnes of certified organic garlic for the past six years. The work is not requiring of hard physical labour, which suits our ages of 72 and 62 but there is a large quantity of it. As a premium garlic product, the garlic is hand planted, hand mulched, hand lifted, hand stored into sheds for curing, hand topped and tailed and hand cleaned before being delivered every two weeks directly to shops in Melbourne and sold via the internet.

Up until 30 August 2015 we staffed the operation with WWOOFers and young persons seeking their second year working holiday visa. Most visa seekers spent their entire required 88 days with us and many cried when they left. You see, we treated these people like family, took them to the beach, local parties, the Snowy River to swim, etc. They worked with great dedication and we got the job done. We spent time with them improving their English and teaching them about organic production. We did not pay them in currency but provided them with good accommodation and healthy food and the evidence of their dedication is ample proof of their satisfaction.

Now to the finances. Two tonnes of our garlic is worth \$50,000 gross. Our cost to support our helpers is approximately \$10,000. The balance of \$40,000 has paid for the expenses of running a 600 acre property with nothing much left over at year's end.

This year we will be lucky to produce one tonne of garlic for sale. The old farmer and his wife and only a few WWOOFers went hammer and tongs to get this result. We tried to employ the only young man we thought was employable locally and he lasted three days.

Plans for the future include purchasing a planter and mulching machine to put in a larger area of garlic. Labour will require only two persons, the farmer and his wife. If we do this, we could produce quite a few tonnes of garlic. We will then need more helpers for the rest of the processes.

Our bottleneck is labour. There isn't any in this area. We had a mutually beneficial relationship with our helpers who were seeking their second year visas.

Now that is gone and also the chance of expansion. Our garlic has won several medals for quality and is so much better than the imported produce.

As a final observation, not all second year working holiday visa seekers are physically able to do the work demanded on many other farms. However they still want to experience Australia and spend some money in the process. They are well capable of helping us with our garlic processing. In our case and I believe in many others, we are not bypassing the local labour market. In areas like ours it does not exist.

We hope the authorities will become aware of the win-win situation of farmers being able to sign off on second year working holiday visa seekers doing voluntary work.

Sincerely

