

# State's fruit, future rots on the ground



Papaya farmer Paul Fagg on his family's farm in Mareeba, with papayas that will be turned into compost. Picture: Sean Davey

## DAN KNOWLES ANDOSKA TUCKER-EVANS

QUEENSLAND farmers are at breaking point as job snobs leave 7000 positions, unfilled on farms across the state in the most vital part of the year.

Farmers have already plowed in or left \$35m worth of crops to rot in fields because they cannot find the workers to harvest them.

Parts of one of Queensland's traditional bedrock industries are on their knees, QFF chief executive officer Georgina Davis said, with farmers working around the clock and risking breakdown.

She said there were 26,000 unfilled jobs nationally and between 6000 and 7000 empty on Queensland farms.

"Farmers and the workers that we have are double-shifting, doing what they can and that's also having an impact on safety," Dr Davis said. "And now because we don't have the confidence, because we don't have the good rain, because we don't have the labour to do the new plantings, the risk to the agricultural sector, particularly to the small producers, is very real. It's here."

Queensland Tourism Industry Council boss Daniel Gschwind said patrons risked

having to "bring your own breakfast" to events because hospitality businesses had vacancies for 1000 chefs.

He said hundreds of thousands of workers had been taken out of the hospitality pool with international students and backpackers drying up. A high-powered gathering of business and government leaders staged by the Queensland Futures Institute was told school leavers were ditching hospitality and pouring into construction training.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Property Council both raised warning flags in the economy.

CCIQ's Amanda Rohan said small businesses were too uncertain about the future and red tape to consider investing or hiring.

Property Council Queensland executive director Chris Mountford said while recent figures showed Queensland benefiting from a lift in interstate migration, property bosses were worried people had moved to Queensland bringing the remote working jobs with them but could be forced back down south as southern bosses demanded employees return onsite.

Big-name restaurant operators said chefs were scarce.

Nehme Ghanem of the Ghanem Group, behind restaurants such as Blackbird Bar & Grill, Donna Chang, said: "In hospitality about 30 per cent of our workforce is international students, working visas, and we're not going to get that this year."

Mareeba farmer Paul Fagg said they had no choice but cut down trees and dump papayas worth \$250,000 because they could not secure enough farmer workers.

Mr Fagg said it wasn't just farmers who relied on labour - they spent money in regional towns and kept the communities alive.