EMBARGOED TO: 26 AUGUST 2021

**FROM TANKS TO TRACTORS - OPERATION GRAIN HARVEST ASSIST LAUNCHED**

A nationwide operation has been launched today (Thursday 26 August 2021), aiming to bolster the supply of local workers to help deliver this year’s bumper grains harvest and relieve pressure on farming communities.

Retired and former ADF servicemen and women are being motivated and mobilised under Operation Grain Harvest Assist, to answer the call-up and work on grain farms stationed throughout Australia.

The joint-Operation aims to recruit willing workers with the transferable skills needed to operate heavy machinery and perform other required jobs during grains harvest, in coming weeks.

Behind the scenes, ADF volunteers are driving the plan’s operations, harvesting communication networks and empowering social media channels, to link their colleagues with farmers and harvest contractors who urgently need workers.

WA Farmers Executive Manager, Policy, Advocacy and Engagement, Jessica Wallace, said with increased workforce shortages limiting many parts of Australia’s grains supply chain, the defence force initiative, to implement Operation Grain Harvest Assist, is greatly appreciated and timely.

“The second consecutive year of this global pandemic is presenting many complex challenges to manage for grain producers; especially securing enough workers to harvest and optimise the value of what’s forecast to be a massive $15 billion grain harvest” she said.

“But it helps ease the burden when major national groups of influence such as the ADF reach out and put their shoulders to the wheel, leading the charge to make a difference on the ground.”

Retired Royal Australian Armoured Corps Lt. Colonel, Garry Spencer AM, said communications are a critical element of the Operation’s success, in order to give the former ADF servicemen and women enough time to consider their options and prepare for postings on-farms, in different regional communities.

“We know COVID-19 has greatly reduced the supply of grain harvest workers from overseas, with more than 100,000 fewer backpackers available this year, compared to 2020,” he said.

“That’s why we’ve put our heads together with grains industry leaders and devised a plan of attack that’ll help not only farmers but also benefit our people with the option to get out and work on-farm to gain a sense of satisfaction, and valuable income, at this vital time.

“Driving a tank or piloting aircraft in a military manoeuvre is surely a great segue to working on-farm using heavy machinery such as harvesters with auto-steer, GPS guidance and air-conditioning?”

Two Facebook pages will be managed by volunteer coordinators, with one of them linking workers to harvest jobs posted for farms in WA and SA, and the other for Queensland, NSW and Victoria.

Mr Spencer said the ADF’s priority was to ensure Retired and former ADF servicemen and women received proper support, guidance and advice, through volunteer co-ordinators being used during the Operation.

He said this would ensure proactive management of key issues such as; labour agreements; employment conditions; training programs; accommodation arrangements; and travel eligibility as ‘Essential Workers’, under COVID-19 rules, in different jurisdictions.

Grain Producers Australia Chair, Andrew Weidemann, said the ADF Operation was welcomed and it complemented other strategic policy initiatives pursued by GPA to help battle serious labour shortages.

He said this included urging government to provide tax relief and concessions to incentivise and expand the national army of Grey Nomads to take up work on farms during peak periods such as harvest or seeding.

“GPA is also calling on rural businesses such as stock agents and agronomists to consider the option of allowing staff members to take leave without pay, to work on-farm this harvest,” he said.

“We’re also working with QANTAS again this year, and the Regional Aviation Association of Australia, to link workers stood down due to COVID-19, with farm businesses, to provide them with temporary employment options and utilise their complementary skills.”

**ENDS**

**Further Information:**

Operation Grain Harvest Assist – WA/SA Facebook Page https://www.facebook.com/groups/360895489034795/about

Operation Grain Harvest Assist – Queensland/NSW/Victoria Facebook Page https://www.facebook.com/groups/1741781399347127/about

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