

Media Release

Ms Mary-Anne Thomas MP
Minister for Regional Development
Minister for Agriculture



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SUPPORTING ALL-ABILITIES EMPLOYMENT IN WANGARATTA

More workers have jobs with one of Australia's largest integrated employers through an Andrews Labor Government program helping businesses to recover and thrive on the other side of the pandemic.

Minister for Regional Development Mary-Anne Thomas met with recruits at Merriwa Industries in Wangaratta to see how new funding is benefiting the business and workers.

Merriwa Industries received a \$325,000 grant through the *Agriculture Workforce Plan*, enabling the Australian Disability Enterprise-registered business to adapt its co-packing operations. This has helped the company increase its productivity through the introduction of an innovative product line and new, automated equipment.

Two existing food packing rooms have been divided and new washrooms built – the business has also delivered training for 142 new and existing workers to ensure they have the skills needed to operate the new equipment.

Merriwa Industries is regional Victoria's largest co-packing business, employing an all-abilities team of over 300 people including more than 100 supported workers. Merriwa operates commercial businesses in packaging and the timber and garden nursery sectors, along with delivering child, youth and family support services.

Employees are supported to develop transferrable skills and receive training to increase their future employment prospects, while also receiving ongoing personal development training.

The *Agriculture Workforce Plan* is helping Victorians, including those who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, to find paid work while helping to ensure the state's vital agriculture sector has the workforce it needs.

Quotes attributable to Minister for Regional Development Mary-Anne Thomas

"Merriwa Industries is a major employer in Wangaratta and the north east, and it's fantastic to see how the business has adapted its operations and taken on new workers."

"We are backing businesses like Merriwa because they create jobs for regional Victorians, including for people that may otherwise face barriers to employment. It's a win for individuals, the community and the local economy."

Quotes attributable to Merriwa Industries Chief Executive Officer Bart Crawley

"The AWP funding had a significant impact on our ability to inform, prepare, support and train staff to deal with the significant challenges COVID created for our organisation. One of those challenges, unprecedented demand for our services, has continued."

"The funding has allowed us to modify our physical footprint and processes, increasing our flexibility to our customer's needs. This included investment in new equipment, technology and systems to support the demand, as well as significant skills development through targeted training."

"The funding was a crucial element in our organisation successfully navigating our teams through the COVID challenges."