



**National Conversation about Work
West Coast Regional Report**



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Introduction

The West Coast is the smallest of the 16 regions in terms of population, with 31,326 people. The Coast is made up of three districts: Buller, Grey and Westland. Major townships include Westport, Greymouth and Hokitika and those that live there are known to New Zealanders as 'Coasters'.

The West Coast region is rugged and stretches from Kahurangi Point in the north to Awarua Point in the south, a distance of 600 km. The West Coast has five National Parks within its boundaries. In fact, almost 90% of the land on the West Coast is administered by the Department of Conservation of New Zealand.

Industries on the West Coast include mining (coal and gold) forestry and wood processing, also fishing, tourism and farming. Other industries include the manufacture and sale of greenstone jewellery, sphagnum moss and stone-collection for garden landscaping. The three driver industries are mining, agriculture and tourism.

Ethnically, the West Coast is less diverse than New Zealand as a whole. 73% of Coasters identify as European, 9% as Māori and 1% identify as Asian and 1% as Pacific people.

The median age of Coasters is 40.2 years compared to the national median of 35.9 years. Compared to the national average the Coast has a greater proportion of people over 65 years of age, and a smaller proportion of people under 15 years.

The 2006 Census shows that unemployment was 2.2% compared to 3.4% for all New Zealand and the median annual income was \$20,400 compared with \$24,000 for all New Zealand. The most frequent occupation was the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sector.

More up to date figures are only available combined with Tasman, Nelson and Marlborough. For this wider area, labour force participation is 68% which is also the national

rate and the unemployment rate 3.1% compared to a national average of 3.8%

“Settling In – West Coast” reports that “employment projections forecast labour force requirements that outstrip the population growth for the region.”

The region has a higher proportion of school leavers without qualification compared to other regions. “Past generations have found that it has been relatively easy to leave school with few formal qualifications and find a job that pays well, “ according to the West Coast Economic Development Strategy.

Process of engagement

The Commission is targeting the following groups nationally: disabled people, organisations supporting the employment of people with disabilities and employers; Māori businesses; cleaners; women’s groups with a focus on employment; young families; local government; migrant workers and sustainable businesses.

We also seek meetings with employers and/or employees in at least one key industry and include meetings with local groups who have expressed an interest in the project and where possible “new voices” – individuals and community groups who may not have participated in dialogue with the Human Rights Commission before. Engagement is reliant on access to individual employers, employees and groups who want to participate and the following summary reports on EEO patterns and trends from those involved.

This regional report follows discussion with approximately 100 people. Engagement with employers and employees for the National Conversation were structured around face-to-face meetings. Regional reports will be produced based on engagement in each region. The final, national report will also include information gathered from on-line engagement and will include recommendations.

The following groups were participants in the West Coast region.

Mining

- Oceana Gold
- Pike River Coal

Agriculture

- Westland Milk Products

Disability Groups

- West Coast Disability Information Network

Māori Business

- Rata Te Awhina

Women

- Sue Merriman Director of a number of West Coast companies including Marshall Heaphy, Timberlands, Shanty Town and Westpower

Public service

- PSA members Department of Conservation
- PSA members Grey Base Hospital

Community group

- NUPE delegates in NGOs

Local government

- West Coast Development Trust.

Local Member of Parliament Chris Auchinvole met with us prior to our visit to the Coast.

This report summarises conversations held early in 2009, at the time of speculation about the possible effects of the global economic recession. A considerable drop in dairy prices compared to record high prices the year before were made by Westland Milk products during our visit. Both mining companies we visited were hiring workers on the West Coast and were moving from a development to a production phase. This was despite global layoffs in the

mining industry due to a fall off in demand from Chinese and other markets and lower profit forecasts in the extractive industries.

A number of people we spoke to were cautiously optimistic about the effect of the global recession and the Coast's traditional resilience. One observation was that young people used to leave the Coast but work was now available for them. The National Bank's analysis of regional trends for the December 2008 quarter provides evidence that this optimism is based on real growth in economic activity. The West Coast recorded the highest quarterly growth of all the regions and the highest annual average rise for the year.

Conversations with groups of employees were structured around the following key questions;

1. What would make a difference for you to achieve equality at work?
2. How would this affect your family?

In some cases the questions were preceded by the DVD Making a Difference. These questions were followed by a general discussion about equality and fairness at work and what was needed to effect the desired change. Typically these discussions elicited a wealth of personal work experiences, stories both positive and negative, and highlighted a number of issues related to fairness at work.

Conversations with employers focused on key questions which included;

1. What are the pressing labour market issues you face?
2. What services/support would assist you?

We also asked about possible impacts of the global recession and asked about recruitment issues given projected labour and skill shortages on the Coast.

Responses from employers and managers also portrayed a variety of views and experiences.

Issues

The following issues were raised by both employees and employers alike. They have been grouped by themes.

- Pay equity
- Hours of work
- Flexible work hours
- Cultural Diversity
- Childcare
- Leave
- Women in leadership
- Skill shortages
- Ageing workforce issues
- People with disabilities

Pay equity

A number of people discussed the pay inequalities between people employed directly by the state, such as DHBs and people employed by NGOs funded by the state to provide public services. Employees of NGOs said that the issue was inadequate funding. Funding, it was felt, did not take into account the geography of the Coast. Population based funding does not adequately meet the cost of providing services to a widely distributed client population. A recent multi employer collective agreement MECA pay settlement was seen as assisting the negotiation of better funding for one service.

“The difference between what I get working here and what I would get in the hospital is \$8.00 an hour” Registered nurse NGO

*“Capitation will always be the same, but I might spend 3 ½ hours getting to a client”
Social worker NGO*

However, a commitment to working with the client groups supported by the NGOs was one of the reasons people in that sector chose to continue to work there, as well as the collegiality of co-workers and the values of the organisation.

The consequences of low pay in general (for both low paid workers providing health services and their clients) were discussed. We were told that inadequate income makes it difficult to gain and keep a job if there is insufficient money for transport and childcare, especially in a community where there is no public transport and childcare is in short supply. Children's access to education may also be difficult if families cannot afford books, uniform or food.

*“Caregivers and support workers in NGOs are critically dependent on movement in the minimum wage” (to achieve pay rises)
Union delegate – NGO*

*“The wages for personal care-givers are terrible. You just get people up to speed and they leave.”
Manager disability service provider*

The demand made on home support workers has increased.

*“The acuity of people we look after has increased a lot. People are going home (from hospital) quite ill”.
Manager, home support service.*

Work was seen as a part of community development.

“You need to take a whole of community perspective: economic, social, health and welfare.” Manager - Māori health provider

“We're part of the community. People know the farmers, people know the company. Loyalty is part of the town spirit” Manager, dairy company

“Ten years ago you couldn’t get a mortgage in Reefton, now (with local employment) schools have improved, we’ve got happier homes with decent incomes, the number of kids staying has increased.” Mine worker

Hours of work

A number of the workplaces visited operated around the clock, seven days a week. (24/7). A number of shift work patterns were used by the workplaces and negotiation of mutually acceptable patterns was complicated by transport issues, affordability issues, safety issues and expectations of “big hours and big pay”. An added variable in the mining sector is whether or not the shift is spent underground. Exposure to daylight or lack of it and the effect of this on the body and brain is a well documented aspect of the health effects of shift work.

“My partner works 60% of his days off, we’re here to make money” Mine worker

One manager said that because of the remoteness of workplaces, and the lack of public transport there was an expectation on the Coast that transport to and from work would be provided by the employer. This had an impact on what shift patterns were viable. Both mines operated 12 hour work “days”. 6am -6pm, and 6pm -6am.

There was recognition by everyone involved in 24/7 production that shift work hours presented a health and safety risk due to fatigue. It was apparent that considerable effort was being made to achieve safe shift practices. It was also recognised that for some workers shift work was not sustainable over the long term. The night shift was seen as particularly difficult, because falling asleep and staying asleep during daylight hours is not easy.

“On night shift I get short sleep and it’s poor sleep. I go to bed after coming off the shift and I’m up at midday or at 10, I might kip in the afternoon.” Mine worker

Education about how to handle shift work was seen as important, with the work patterns (meal breaks and schedules of activities) within the shift being an important component of managing fatigue. Mixed views were expressed of the adequacy of fatigue management. Sometimes policy did not match practice. For example meal breaks were not taken at set points but determined by work demands.

“You need to understand eating patterns and sleep patterns and when and what you drink. If you’re not physically occupied just before dawn you can drop off.”
Mine worker

Health and safety were not the only concern in relation to shift work. The impact of working when other people are not, for example evenings and weekends, inevitably has an effect on relationships. In addition, at least some of the days off are spent catching up on sleep.

“My partner and I both work shifts, we get a weekend off together once every five –six weeks.” Mine worker

“There’s change in the industry, the attitude was -don’t be a wuss, you work long hours working for big money, now people are looking at worklife balance. They want a good job and decent money.” Mine worker

Flexible work hours

This issue was raised in a number of the meetings and a wide range of views was expressed. A number of employees expressed their appreciation of informal flexible work practices that met their needs.

“If it hits the fan with the kids I can go home”
Administrator

Others expressed misgivings about the effect on other people at the workplace.

*“There’s a problem with fellow workers, they have to backfill. (when a fulltime position is made part-time on request) Jobs need to be redesigned. The employee is struggling to meet the needs of other workers”
Public sector worker.*

“It’s happening now in the Christmas break, the single person has to work”. Public sector worker

Another concern was that, while employees had successfully negotiated part time work arrangements they were expected to do the same amount of work that they had previously done full time. It is apparent that some groups of workers find it a lot easier to work flexibly than others. For example, production workers and tanker drivers are less likely to be able to work flexible hours than administrative staff.

“It is more difficult to be flexible with production staff and those working (24/7) shifts” Manager

The dialogue between staff requesting flexible work hours and management which is a requirement of the flexible work legislation was seen positively. A number of workplaces have had informal flexible work practices for many years.

“The discussion that has to happen in the workplace is a good thing.” Union organiser

“It’s not a formal policy, we just do it. It’s not difficult.” Manager Māori health provider

Cultural diversity

One of the issues raised in workplaces employing a diverse workforce was that of language in the workplace. Government-funded English language courses are available to people with permanent residence, but language support for other groups (prior to achieving permanent residence and “trailing spouses”) requires another approach.

Groups of workers speaking another language can create barriers with other workers who feel excluded. The issue of language in the workplace has so far been framed in terms of the right of speakers of other languages to use their own language unless there are compelling health and safety issues.

A number of employers mentioned that the length of time from offering a job to a worker from another country often took months. Employers did not know where the delay occurred (in New Zealand or the country of origin). However, no-one suggested that the various components required such as police checks were unnecessary. The time taken to get the paperwork in order was considerably shortened if residency had been approved prior to the job offer being made.

One person raised the issue of a worker whose overseas qualifications were not recognised. The worker was made aware before migrating here that his qualification would not be recognised here and he accepted that. However the loss of status in the community was difficult for him.

Child care

A common theme of EEO issues raised on the Coast was the availability of childcare. The absence of formal childcare is a major issue in many parts of the Coast. Informal arrangements are made, in some instances with extended family if they also reside on the coast. Otherwise one parent is unavailable for work outside school hours. This situation is particularly difficult for sole parents seeking to re-enter the workforce.

We heard that unavailability of child care was one of the reasons that New Coasters leave the Coast. We were told that a typical scenario for New Coasters was that one member of a family obtained a job on the Coast and on starting employment the whole family relocated to the Coast. At some point the “trailing spouse” sought employment and then found that she (usually) could not access childcare, when and if she found a job.

In some areas limited childcare is available. Centres are not open for the hours required to support employment, either because the centre is not open all the days worked or not open during shift hours, or not open a full day.

“There’s a one year waiting list for the local childcare centre and it’s open from 8.30 - 4.00”
Working mother

School holiday programmes are also expensive if they are available.

Leave

A concern was raised in one meeting about the effect of Paid Parental Leave provisions and the Holidays Act. Annual leave is accrued while people are on parental leave, but when that leave is taken, people find that it is paid at the average amount of income received during the paid parental leave time. That is, substantially less than their current salary.

Workers on return to work find that they have annual leave accrued and until those accrued days are used, annual leave is paid at a much lower rate than their current salary. Pay packets that include a period of annual leave came as an unwelcome surprise to people returning from parental leave.

People from the NGO sector, particularly those in management roles find it difficult to take annual leave because there is no-one else available to do their work. For

some managers the only way they can truly be on holiday (that is not on call) is to leave the country.

*“I do it because someone has to do it. It’s worthwhile when you get the breakthrough.”
Manager disability support service*

Women in leadership

There are few women in governance positions (ie directorships) on the Coast, which is a nation wide issue. The woman director, who had achieved a directorship on the basis of a Member of Parliament’s recommendation, said that she had declined to put her name on the nominations list of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs because she felt she should be there on her own merit.

“Boards need that good mix. Women add value. It’s nice to have that different way of thinking. It’s not just the core skills; you need governance skills, strategic skills and relationship skills. Boards need to look at current members’ skills, look at skills that are lacking and recruit for that.” Woman director

Skill shortages

Concerns about education and skills shortages are being addressed by a number of initiatives. The slogan of the West Coast Economic Development Strategy is “gain, train and retain”.

Gaining skilled workers refers to attracting “New Coasters” or attracting people back home. Some employers we spoke to prioritised hiring local people and to upskilling them for more specialised roles. Others have to recruit internationally for skilled workers.

The Coast is seen as a hard to staff area and successful approaches include a family friendly approach. Couples are flown in for interviews, and pastoral care provided to support

the whole family “settle” on the Coast. The importance of meeting the needs of “trailing spouses” has already been referred to in the context of child care provisions

*“Pastoral care is really important. Recruitment is difficult, then you have to retain people.”
Manager, mining company.*

A number of the businesses we spoke to offer scholarships, apprenticeships and opportunities for further education opportunities to their workers. Retaining skilled staff is seen as a challenge in some sectors. Turnover rates fluctuated considerably between enterprises and even within the same workplace. At one meeting we heard from employees who had worked for the same employer for 30-40 years, while at the same time another employer is seeking to minimise the cost of high turnover by linking the payment of relocation costs on continued employment for a specific period.

Ageing workforce

We did not hear any accounts of discrimination about ageing during our visit. However, based on statistical data available to us, the fact of an ageing workforce needs to be flagged as a future issue on the Coast. A number of occupations (for instance mining) was seen as “a young man’s game”, but older men were now doing these jobs. We were told that the average age of the mining workforce at one mine was in the 40s.

A group of predominantly older women working in the NGO sector reflected that there were many opportunities for older people on the Coast. One woman observed that employers were more open (to older workers) than in Canterbury, for instance. During the discussion the group wondered if the employment situation may be easier for older women than for older men on the Coast. This was thought to be because women are more prepared to accept lower pay and or part time work in the transition to retirement.

People with disabilities

We were told that physical access to buildings and to toilet facilities was an issue on the Coast. The size of the population and the cost of building modification was a barrier to providing fully accessible buildings.

“In one building an accessible toilet was put in, but there are steps up into the building. People can’t afford to fund the change that’s needed.”

Manager disability support service

Lack of accessible public transport was a particularly acute problem on the Coast.

“There’s one wheelchair van for the Coast. It’s not available to workers.” Support worker

It was observed that during a recession the first people to go, in a small business were people with a disability, because they needed support to do the job. However, this had not happened yet.

Conclusion

Our visit to the Coast followed our engagement in the Wellington region and at the early stages of the world economic recession. We were struck by the sense of optimism and resilience in almost all of the meetings we had. Regional development on the Coast is very buoyant and there is an expectation that it would remain so. We appreciated the warmth and candour of the people we met and hope that we have faithfully reported their views.

Issues identified by both employers and employees included: pay equity, hours of work, flexible work hours, child care, leave and barriers to employment for people with disabilities. Employers talked about the challenges of a culturally diverse workforce and problems associated with skill shortages. We also heard about the experience of women in leadership.

While many of the equal employment opportunity issues were very similar to those reported in Wellington, for example work hours, flexible work; child care and pay; the experience of those issues was different. Long working hours on the Coast, for instance, were driven by the demands of shift work coupled with transport demands, the distances between clients and for both places the absence of another person with the skills to do the work.

Child care issues also had a distinctive characteristic on the Coast. Rural areas with small towns which are widely dispersed, catering to working parents who need very flexible child care provisions, are unlikely to be able to support commercially viable child care centres.

Lack of public transport and lack of accessible public transport impacted on a number of workers. It had an effect on what shift hours were possible, as well as being a significant barrier to employment for groups who could not access private transport, such as families on low incomes and people with disabilities.

This suggests that one size fits all policy settings may have unintended consequences and that regional solutions within broad national parameters may be a more fruitful way to reduce barriers to equal employment opportunities.

Possible recommendations for the final report

- Ensure that material about managing shift work includes advice about reducing the impact on relationships, as well as health and safety advice.
- Strongly advocate for child care provisions that better meet the needs of rural communities, and parents who work non-standard hours.
- Investigate whether there is an unintended negative consequence to the accrual of annual leave during parental leave and if so, how that could be remedied.