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Return Migration and Earnings of Workers in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme



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of Labour
TE TARI MAHI



Paul Merwood
Labour and Immigration Research Centre
Department of Labour

Disclaimer: This report was undertaken while the author was on secondment to Statistics New Zealand. This report is part of the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) prototype that was created using Migrant Levy funding secured by the Department of Labour. The opinions, findings, recommendations and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the author. Statistics NZ or the Department of Labour take no responsibility for any omissions or errors in the information contained here.

The results in this report are not official statistics, they have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) prototype managed by Statistics NZ. On-going work within Statistics NZ to develop the IDI means it will not be possible to exactly reproduce the data presented here.

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Department of Labour
PO Box 3705
Wellington
New Zealand
www.dol.govt.nz

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<http://dol.govt.nz/research> or email research@dol.govt.nz.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) policy allows for the temporary entry of overseas workers to work in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture industries. In the four seasons of the RSE scheme to date, over 24,600 workers have arrived to participate in the scheme – yet many are return workers from previous seasons. The purpose of this report is to examine the return rates of RSE workers, their seasonal earnings, and duration of employment.

Key findings

- 49.3 percent of first-time RSE workers return in the next season and most (86.9 percent) return to the same employer
- Over half (54.4 percent) of all RSE workers have returned at least once to work in another season – but the pattern of return varies between source countries.
- In the 2010/11 season (the fourth season), 62.1 percent of RSE workers were returning workers
- 60 percent of workers from the first season (2007/08) have returned to work at least one other season
- 23 percent of workers from the first season (just over 1,000 workers) have participated in all four seasons
- Over the first three seasons, 90 percent of RSE workers' employment duration was between 3–7 months
- The mean earnings over the first three seasons ranged from \$12,840 in the 2007/08 season to \$12,630 in the 2009/10 season.

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1.1 Introduction

Seasonal workers represent the single largest category of temporary workers within the OECD, comprising more than one in four in 2009 (OECD, 2010). Temporary or circular migration is seen as a way of enabling poorer, less-skilled workers to earn higher incomes abroad, send remittances to their home country, and benefit the host country with their labour (McKenzie, D., Gibson, J., 2010). New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme explicitly attempts to achieve this 'triple win' (Ramasamy et al, 2008).

The RSE policy was introduced in April 2007 to allow for the temporary entry of offshore workers to work in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture industries.¹ Preference is given to workers from the Pacific Islands Forum (with the current exception of Fiji). To date, around 75 percent of seasonal workers participating in the scheme have been from Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, exceeding the 50 percent originally anticipated by the policy.

Circular migration is one of the core aspects of the RSE policy. The scheme provides for the return of experienced workers in future seasons if they have an offer of employment, want to return, and meet immigration requirements (Department of Labour, 2010). By allowing workers to return in subsequent years the policy attempts to achieve a number of aims. Overstaying was identified as a risk to the integrity of the RSE scheme, but limiting the duration of stay (to maintain links to workers' home country) and allowing workers to return in subsequent seasons were seen to mitigate this risk.

However, the circular migration dimension of the RSE scheme is intended to have much wider benefits – to New Zealand employers, the workers themselves, and to their home communities. The Department of Labour has undertaken a survey of RSE employers each season since the policy began. The results to date have shown employers have a high regard for their Pacific RSE workers. Employers rate their Pacific RSE workers higher than all other groups of seasonal workers (non-Pacific seasonal workers, working holidaymakers, and New Zealanders) for their dependability, enthusiasm while working, and their productivity. The surveys have shown consistently that employers' participation in the RSE scheme has resulted in better quality and more productive workers, and a more stable seasonal workforce than in previous years.

The benefits to the seasonal workers themselves are far-reaching. McKenzie & Gibson (2010) found that participating in the RSE scheme had a 'large and statistically positive impact on household income per capita' in their case studies of Tongan and ni-Vanuatu workers. They also found that the longer the duration of participation the greater the impact on household per capita income. Bedford's (2011) study of workers' earnings on a Hawke's Bay orchard showed individual RSE worker's earnings increased from one season to the next. McKenzie & Gibson (2010) also report other less tangible impacts, reporting a significant increase in participants' subjective wellbeing.

¹ The policy became operational in October 2007.

A case study of Tongan RSE workers (Gibson et al, 2008) found the potential for future migration opportunities was a motive for participation, with 97 percent of workers in their study reporting that a very important reason for participating in the RSE scheme was to form links with New Zealand to begin a path to permanent residence. This same sentiment was echoed by ni-Vanuatu workers in McKenzie et al (2008), although in both studies the dominant motives were economic. In Bedford et al (2010), a Tuvaluan respondent describes an advantage of being an RSE worker was to explore the possibility of returning to New Zealand as a permanent resident.

Yet there are a range of factors that determine whether a worker returns in subsequent seasons. Employers offer opportunities to return based on a worker's past performance on the job, which may be measured by their productivity on the job but also their conduct while in New Zealand. There is also evidence of how recruitment practices on the part of the sending state may determine whether a worker returns. Bedford (2011) notes that island governments and communities want to maximise the benefits of higher earnings by sharing the opportunities of participation around as many workers as possible.

Workers may choose not to return for their own reasons. Several studies report an unwillingness to return for reasons of family separation (Department of Labour, 2010, Gibson et al, 2008, McKenzie & Gibson, 2010). In the case of Tuvalu (Bedford et al, 2010), cost is a barrier to returning to New Zealand.

This report uses the Department of Labour's immigration data to examine the first four seasons of the RSE scheme from 2007/08 through to 2010/11 and the extent to which seasonal workers return to New Zealand. The final section of this report uses the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) prototype developed by Statistics New Zealand to provide an estimate of RSE workers' seasonal earnings and employment duration.²

1.2 RSE worker return rates

In the four seasons of the RSE scheme to date, 24,614 seasonal workers have arrived in New Zealand to participate.³ Yet the total pool of individuals who have participated in the scheme is 13,895 workers, indicating that many of these workers are returning from previous seasons.

Analysis of the movement of individuals from one season to the next showed that the average return rate across the first three seasons was 49.3 percent.⁴ This is calculated as the proportion of first-time workers who return in the season immediately following. Of those first-time workers who returned the following season, 86.9 percent worked for the same employer.

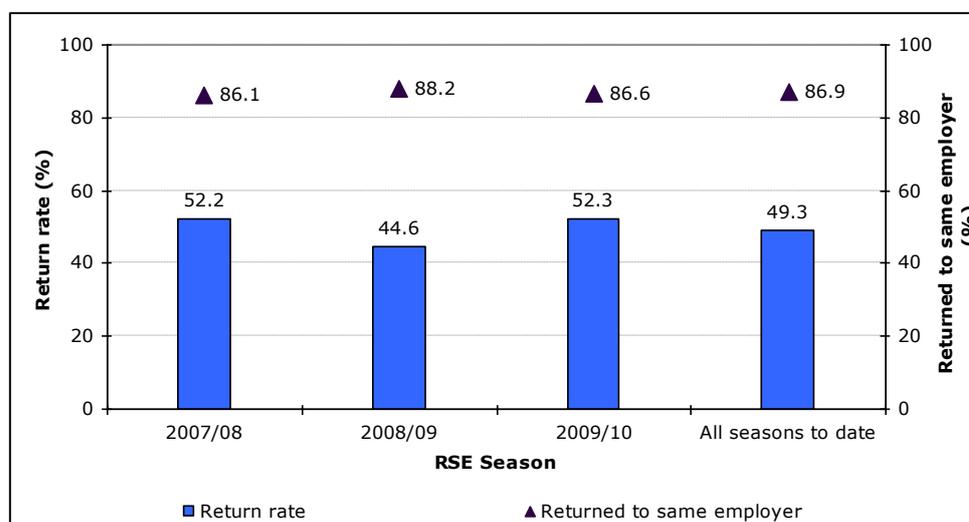
² For more information on the IDI and prototype see Appendix A.

³ July – June financial years 2007/08 – 2010/11

⁴ Workers whose first season was 2010/11 (the fourth season) were excluded because they have not yet had an opportunity to return.

Figure 1 shows the return rate for first-time workers beginning in each of the three seasons 2007/08-2010/11 and the proportion of returnees who worked for the same employer.

Figure 1 RSE worker return rates by season: 2007/08 – 2009/10



Source: Department of Labour

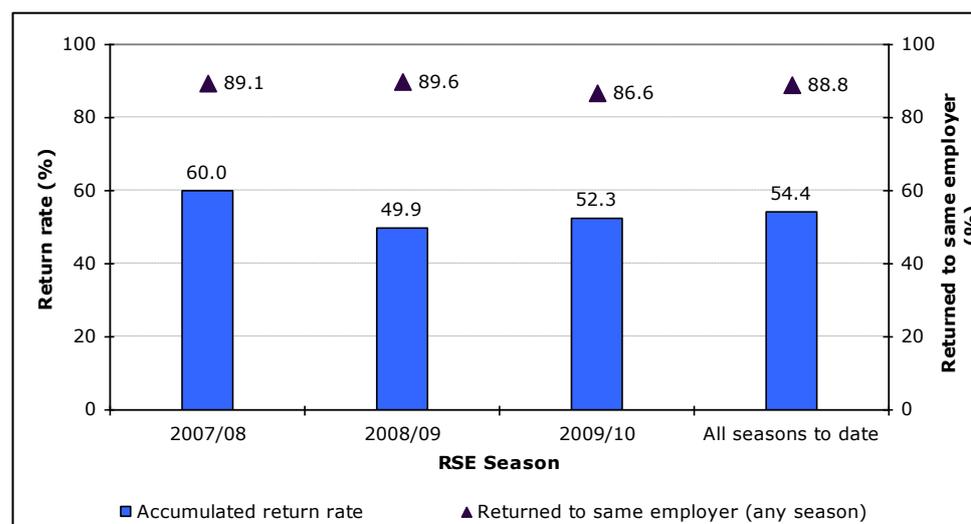
Surveys of RSE employers have shown a willingness on the part of employers to recruit the same workers from one season to the next. Returning workers are often viewed as more productive than new workers – most ‘hit the ground running’ or require minimal training (Department of labour, 2012). Bedford’s (2011) study of workers’ earnings on a Hawke’s Bay orchard showed returning RSE workers had the highest median gross wages over a 12 week period compared to other worker groups (new RSE workers, new and returning New Zealanders, and casual workers), providing evidence of greater productivity amongst the returning RSE workers.

In the Department of Labour’s latest survey of 251 horticulture and viticulture employers, nearly half (47 percent) of the RSE employers wanted to recruit the same workers for the next season, and 45 percent wanted a mix of new and returning workers from the same countries they currently recruit from.⁵

This analysis has shown that for some workers the seasons in which they participate are not consecutive. Therefore, a second measure is used to examine the rate of return across any season. The accumulated return rate for workers participating in the first 3 seasons is 54.4 percent, meaning over half of all new workers have returned at least once to work in another season. This rate is expected to increase over time, and is currently highest for workers who participated in the first season (Figure 2).

⁵ Results from the survey of RSE employers undertaken in 2011 (for the 2010/11 season).

Figure 2 Accumulated return rates of RSE workers by season: 2007/08 – 2009/10



Source: Department of Labour

At an aggregate level, return rates are no different between workers from the Pacific countries and those from other countries. Yet there is significant variation between nationalities within these groups. Within the Pacific region, workers from Tuvalu and Kiribati have lower return rates than those of the larger Pacific nations (Table 1). Among the non-Pacific countries, workers from the Philippines and Indonesia have higher than average return rates, with most returning to work for the same employer from season to season.

Table 1 RSE worker return rates by nationality for workers beginning 2007/08 – 2009/10

| Region | Nationality | Return rate ¹ | Returned to previous employer | Accumulated return rate ² | Returned to previous employer (from any season) |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Pacific states | Kiribati | 36.0 | 56.1 | 50.0 | 71.9 |
| | Samoa | 45.3 | 80.1 | 49.1 | 85.8 |
| | Solomon Is. | 48.5 | 90.3 | 56.6 | 89.2 |
| | Tonga | 51.8 | 92.4 | 55.1 | 92.6 |
| | Tuvalu | 27.0 | 100.0 | 38.3 | 83.3 |
| | Vanuatu | 51.2 | 84.7 | 57.1 | 87.3 |
| Pacific states Total | | 49.3 | 85.8 | 54.4 | 88.1 |
| Other countries | India | 53.5 | 100.0 | 57.6 | 100.0 |
| | Indonesia | 70.9 | 93.3 | 78.9 | 95.0 |
| | Malaysia | 38.0 | 94.6 | 41.7 | 96.3 |
| | Philippines | 73.6 | 100.0 | 77.3 | 100.0 |
| | Thailand | 47.5 | 84.7 | 52.9 | 83.7 |
| | Others | 27.5 | 100.0 | 30.0 | 100.0 |
| Other countries Total | | 49.3 | 90.6 | 54.5 | 90.9 |
| Total | | 49.3 | 86.9 | 54.4 | 88.8 |

Notes: Workers whose first season was 2010/11 are excluded because they have not yet had an opportunity to return.

¹The return rate is the proportion of first-time workers who return in the very next season.

² The accumulated return rate is the proportion of first-time workers who returned in any subsequent season.

Source: Department of Labour

As discussed in the introduction, a worker's ability to return depends on a range of factors, including their performance, the recruitment practices within each of the Pacific states (Bedford et al. 2010, Bedford, 2011), and their individual circumstances. In the case of Tuvalu's low return rate, Bedford et al (2010) describe the travel costs as a significant barrier for prospective workers owing to Tuvalu's geographic isolation.

1.3 Seasonal composition

Returning RSE workers have a significant impact on the composition and depth of experience within the pool of RSE workers each season. The depth of worker experience has increased substantially over time and has important implications for employers.

The Department of Labour (2010) showed that by the second season, employers were reporting that pastoral care management was easier when they had return workers, and surveys of RSE employers indicate some involvement of returning workers in training new staff (Department of labour, 2012). Employers report that returning workers are immediately productive compared to first-time RSE workers and New Zealand casual workers. However, Bedford (2011) reported that some employers found a reduction in work ethic over time, suggesting that the benefit of returning RSE workers to employers may plateau.

Since the first season, when all workers were new arrivals under the scheme, the proportion of first-time workers has decreased to 37.9 percent of those arriving in the 2010/11 season – nearly two-thirds were returning workers (Table 2). Furthermore, over half (54 percent) of the RSE workers arriving in the 2010/11 season were returning to an employer for whom they had previously worked.

In terms of the level of experience of workers, within the 2010/11 season 23.8 percent of workers were in their second season, 23.3 percent were in their third, and 15 percent were working their fourth season.

Table 2 Composition of new and returning RSE workers in each of the seasons 2007/08 - 2010/11

| RSE Season | Total workers arrived ¹ | Returning workers (%) ² | Returning to a previous employer (%) |
|------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 2007/08 | 4,486 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 2008/09 | 6,821 | 34.8 | 30.0 |
| 2009/10 | 6,216 | 59.5 | 52.5 |
| 2010/11 | 7,091 | 62.1 | 54.0 |

¹ RSE arrival numbers sourced from www.dol.govt.nz/initiatives/strategy/rse/information.asp.

² The returning workers figure represents the proportion of workers arriving in each season who had been an RSE worker in any previous season.

Source: Department of Labour

1.4 The first season – a closer look at return rates for workers from the 2007/08 season

In the first season of the RSE scheme, 4,486 workers arrived in New Zealand. To date, 60 percent of the original cohort has returned to participate in at least one subsequent season, and 23 percent (just over 1,000 workers) have participated in all four seasons.

Table 3 compares the differences in return rates by nationality for those whose first season was 2007/08. Two return rates are presented; the first shows the proportion who returned in 2008/09 (52.2 percent), while the second shows the proportion who returned in any subsequent season, or an accumulated rate (60 percent). The difference between these two rates indicates the extent to which workers had non-consecutive returns.

For Kiribati and Tuvalu this difference is large, and several factors may account for this. While it is unclear to what extent job performance, employer demand or selection processes determine the return of these particular workers, research to date highlights other possibilities. Already noted is the cost constraint facing workers travelling from smaller, more remote areas of the Pacific, and time may be needed between seasons to raise the money to return.

It is also likely that workers' earnings influence their decision to return. In the case of Tuvalu and Kiribati, a survey of workers participating in the first season found workers were generally disappointed at earning less than they expected to earn (Department of Labour, 2010). The final section of this report confirms the first season earnings for I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan workers were, on average, less than those earned by other RSE workers.

A further reason for differences in return patterns may relate to the personal cost of participation. Several studies describe how family separation is an important consideration for workers choosing to participate in the scheme (Bedford, 2011, Department of Labour, 2010, Gibson et al, 2008, McKenzie & Gibson, 2010). The burden of family separation may diminish if workers return intermittently rather than consecutively.

Table 3 RSE worker return rates by nationality for workers beginning 2007/08

| Region | Nationality | Total workers arrived ¹ | Returned 2008/09 | Accumulated return rate ² | Returned with season breaks ³ | Returned to a previous employer |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Pacific states | Kiribati | 69 | 24.6 | 47.8 | 60.6 | 54.5 |
| | Samoa | 647 | 55.3 | 60.4 | 14.9 | 85.3 |
| | Solomon Is. | 238 | 59.7 | 68.1 | 13.6 | 92.0 |
| | Tonga | 805 | 55.0 | 60.2 | 13.0 | 94.0 |
| | Tuvalu | 99 | 25.3 | 41.4 | 39.0 | 78.0 |
| | Vanuatu | 1,698 | 48.9 | 56.7 | 20.8 | 87.4 |
| Pacific states Total | | 3,556 | 51.0 | 58.3 | 18.4 | 88.2 |
| Other countries | India | 41 | 90.2 | 90.2 | 73.0 | 100.0 |
| | Indonesia | 249 | 80.7 | 88.4 | 24.5 | 93.6 |
| | Malaysia | 364 | 43.4 | 50.5 | 15.8 | 95.1 |
| | Philippines | 80 | 72.5 | 76.3 | 9.8 | 100.0 |
| | Thailand | 195 | 39.1 | 58.9 | 36.9 | 79.5 |
| | Czech Rep. | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| Other countries Total | | 930 | 56.8 | 66.3 | 25.8 | 92.3 |
| Total | | 4,486 | 52.2 | 60.0 | 20.1 | 89.1 |

¹ RSE arrival numbers sourced from www.dol.govt.nz/initiatives/strategy/rse/information.asp.

² The proportion of first-time workers who returned in any subsequent season

³ Expressed as a proportion of all returning workers.

Source: Department of Labour

1.5 RSE workers' earnings

In 2008, the Department of Labour conducted an audit of pastoral care provision and work conditions for RSE workers (Ramasamy, 2009). The 402 workers covered by the audit had an average gross pay of \$10,755 with average work duration of 18.5 weeks (around 4.3 months). The average net return for these workers (after deductions for airfares, food, accommodation, transport, and health insurance) was \$5,950, or approximately 55 percent of workers' gross earnings.

The following analysis uses the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) prototype developed by Statistics New Zealand. For further information on the IDI and prototype development see Appendix A.

Earnings information was extracted for people identified in the IDI prototype as RSE workers for the season or seasons they were in New Zealand as an RSE worker.⁶ The analysis includes earnings data for RSE workers who arrived in New Zealand in each of the first three seasons 2007/08 to 2009/10.

For each worker, the aim was to quantify the number of months worked and the gross earnings for each season. For the purpose of this analysis, the season began

⁶ From 1 April 2009 RSE workers have had a specific tax code. However, this tax code is not included in the IDI prototype so cannot yet be used to identify RSE related earnings.

in the month of arrival in New Zealand and ended in the month of departure.⁷ Table 4 below shows the estimated gross seasonal earnings by financial year and country for each of the first three seasons. The mean earnings have been very consistent over the seasons, although there is considerable variation between countries.

Generally, lower earnings reflect shorter employment duration, which in turn is influenced by seasonal factors such as weather conditions or the state of the crop (Bedford, 2011). The duration of employment has remained relatively constant over time. Over the first three seasons, 90 percent of employment spells were between 3-7 months.

Table 4 Estimated gross earnings and employment duration of RSE workers, 2007/08 – 2009/10

| RSE season ¹ | Nationality | Seasonal earnings (\$) | | Employment duration (months) | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|----------|
| | | Mean | Median | Mean | Median |
| 2007/08 | Kiribati/Tuvalu ² | 6,400 | 6,110 | 4.4 | 5 |
| | Samoa | 11,720 | 11,500 | 5.6 | 6 |
| | Solomon Is. | 8,930 | 8,310 | 4.5 | 4 |
| | Tonga | 12,820 | 12,950 | 5.7 | 6 |
| | Vanuatu | 12,060 | 12,090 | 5.4 | 5 |
| | Other countries | 16,320 | 16,780 | 6.5 | 7 |
| All RSE workers 2007/08 | | 12,840 | 13,020 | 5.6 | 6 |
| 2008/09 | Kiribati/Tuvalu ² | 10,390 | 6,720 | 5.0 | 4 |
| | Samoa | 10,790 | 10,920 | 5.1 | 5 |
| | Solomon Is | 11,430 | 12,950 | 4.9 | 6 |
| | Tonga | 12,240 | 12,060 | 5.3 | 6 |
| | Vanuatu | 12,200 | 12,360 | 5.1 | 5 |
| | Other countries | 15,610 | 15,210 | 6.0 | 6 |
| All RSE workers 2008/09 | | 12,660 | 12,470 | 5.3 | 5 |
| 2009/10 | Kiribati | 15,860 | 14,380 | 5.8 | 6 |
| | Samoa | 11,020 | 9,850 | 4.9 | 4 |
| | Solomon Is. | 10,750 | 11,050 | 4.7 | 5 |
| | Tonga | 12,970 | 12,640 | 5.1 | 5 |
| | Tuvalu | 9,680 | 8,240 | 4.7 | 4 |
| | Vanuatu | 11,960 | 11,800 | 5.0 | 5 |
| | Other countries | 14,690 | 14,500 | 5.7 | 6 |
| All RSE workers 2009/10 | | 12,630 | 12,220 | 5.2 | 5 |

Notes:

¹ The financial year of arrival.

² Countries combined for confidentiality reasons

Source: Figures have been extracted from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) prototype managed by Statistics NZ.

⁷ Where a worker had left New Zealand short term and returned in the same financial year, the spells of employment were combined for that season.

1.6 Conclusion

This report shows we can expect that over half of all new RSE workers will return to work another season in New Zealand, but there is a range of factors at play in determining which workers will return. While a worker's past performance is the main prerequisite for a job offer in the next season, the way they conduct themselves outside of work and any particular selection practices within their home countries may also determine whether they are given the opportunity to return. Workers themselves must also weigh up the potential costs of participating in the scheme against the expected benefits.

Research to date has shown that the RSE scheme has benefitted employers, RSE workers, and their communities at home. This report has shown that circular migration is an important element of the RSE policy, and concludes that returning workers have made a significant contribution to the success of the policy. As the depth of worker experience has increased, employers who participate in the scheme have experienced better quality and more productive workers, and a more stable seasonal workforce.

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APPENDIX A

Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) and prototype

Statistics NZ developed the IDI prototype using Migrant Levy funding received as a result of a Cabinet decision in March 2011.

The IDI prototype consolidates current integrated datasets managed by Statistics NZ, and links Department of Labour migration and international movements data with a link through to Statistics NZ's Longitudinal Business Database (LBD).

The IDI prototype is being used by Statistics NZ to test, analyse, and develop the IDI, and its processes and outputs. The prototype is also being used by researchers to undertake research a number of years before the IDI is completed.

The IDI will create an integrated data environment with longitudinal microdata about individuals, households, and firms. The IDI will enable a wide range of opportunities to answer research, policy, and evaluation questions to support informed decision making.

For more information on the prototype and development of the IDI visit Statistics New Zealand at www.stats.govt.nz/idi

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