THE Victorian Farmers Federation has attacked the Baillieu government’s TAFE cuts, warning that they will increase skill shortages and the reliance on temporary foreign workers.

VFF president Peter Tuohey complained the policy was driven by Treasury, and the Nationals had struggled within the Liberal-led Coalition to shape policy.

Mr Tuohey's intervention increases the pressure on the rurally focused Nationals. The Baillieu government relies on the Nationals for its one-seat majority and many marginal seats are regional.

"The National Party do listen to us but they are only a minority in the Coalition, so they don't make the decisions. The Treasurer has more power than even the Premier, I believe," Mr Tuohey told an industry breakfast in Melbourne yesterday organised by the Victorian TAFE Association.

"The National Party has been struggling a bit since they have been in government."

The TAFE cuts threatened provision of services in regional areas at a time when a state parliamentary report in May said there was a 100,000 shortfall in farm labour nationally, he said.

The report also found that only 8 per cent of people in the sector had tertiary qualifications, compared with 25 per cent across the broader workforce.

"Already a skills shortage exists and it will only get worse with these new TAFE cuts," Mr Tuohey said. "The impacts are going to be felt into the future and the end result is that we will be looking for more overseas workers and I'm not sure that is what we want."

A grain and sheep farmer at Pyramid Hill in the state's north, Mr Tuohey said he had felt the skills shortage first-hand. For the past 12 months he had been looking for a skilled farm hand but hadn't found anyone who could do the job. "I'm just having to work harder," he said.

The government is cutting public funding for training after a blowout in the student-demand-led market. But while the blowout has been caused by an explosion in private provision, the TAFE sector is bearing heavy cuts. The sector estimates it will lose almost $300 million in government funding and 1900 TAFE jobs will go.

Agriculture Minister and deputy Nationals leader Peter Walsh defended the cuts, noting that funding for apprentices had been increased.

"It's not often a farmer needs a fitness trainer or an aroma therapist, but they do need plumbers, electricians and mechanics," Mr Walsh said.

The TAFE sector, however, has warned that the rise in apprenticeship funding is more than offset by the loss of special funding.

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