

Migration trim to protect jobs

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Immigration Minister Chris Evans will cut the migration intake, as demand for workers drops and unions raise concerns about job security, and will review which occupations get priority access to Australia.

Senator Evans refused to elaborate on the size of the cuts to the permanent program, saying it was a matter to be decided by cabinet in the lead-up to the federal budget.

“It’s fair to say that we expect the demand in the economy for labour to reduce, as it’s a program very much linked to the demand for labour,” he said, in the first confirmation the government would cut migration in response to the economic slowdown. “We expect to run a smaller program.”

In 2008-09, the Rudd government announced a record migration intake, including 133,500 skilled migrants, in order to cope with labour shortages, a growing econ-

omy and rising inflation. Senator Evans told reporters the economic situation confronting Australia at this year’s budget would be “almost the reverse”.

But he said that industries such as health would continue to require skilled labour from overseas to meet local shortages.

“One of the things we know about the health industry is that in a recession, actually the health industry comes under more pressure, rather than less,” Senator Evans said. He said the government was reviewing the list of occupations on its critical skills list, which gives skilled migrants who are not sponsored by an employer priority visa processing.

This followed a letter to the minister last week from the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union calling on the government to take construction workers off the critical skills list because of rising unemployment in the industry. “The critical skills list

is under review. And that’s one of the things we’ll look at as the circumstances change. We’ll probably have a formal look at that in the next couple of weeks,” Senator Evans said.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Peter Anderson expected a drop in the migration intake for 2009-10 given the economic circumstances.

“Business needs to recognise that the migration program is only a supplement to domestic labour, and there will be plenty of domestic labour coming on in coming months,” he said.

Immigration analyst Bob Kinnaird said the federal government had to scale down its immigration intake before July 1 to slow down the growth in labour supply at a time the commonwealth wanted to protect local jobs.

□ Senator Evans yesterday announced a \$4.4 million increase in funding for the United Nations’ refugee agency, to \$14.3 million.