

## Western Australian service to aboriginal pastoralists

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**Abstract.** The Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia commenced the Indigenous Management Support Service in 2002, in partnership with the Indigenous Land Corporation and six Kimberley pastoral properties managed by Indigenous Communities. Lessons have been learnt as to what is required to build a commercial pastoral enterprise managed solely by Indigenous Directors and providing sustainable pastoral careers for community members. It is a holistic support service focussing on production management; marketing; business management and capacity building.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, pastoralists; production management; marketing; business management and capacity building.

### Introduction

Sixty culturally and geographically diverse Aboriginal communities in Western Australia hold commercial pastoral (beef) leases. These often very isolated communities have varying skills requirements for animal husbandry, business operation and regulatory observance. Like all developing enterprises they also need strategies for improving infrastructure (fences, yards and waters) and improved herd characteristics (genetics and viable numbers). Other communities manage rural land where agricultural and horticultural crops and sheep are the foci.

The Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia (DAFWA) has worked in formalised relationships with Aboriginal primary producers for the past seven years. From 2001, a holistic government service woven from a broad raft of disciplines has worked in close partnership with more than 30 widely dispersed Aboriginal communities. This relationship is characterised by the ratio of government officers to the number of properties - one officer to two Aboriginal pastoral trainees to three properties – to provide action-based business mentoring and in-situ skills development. Each property may have up to 20 people who are being assisted by this mentoring process. Training is concentrated on business governance, herd development and management and cattle marketing, and for the optimum use and return from the land and infrastructural investments. Income from cattle or wool or other produce and services (e.g. agistment) generate income for business and community development.

The understanding between a DAFWA officer and the directors of the property begins with an assessment of the property and the aspirations of the community. A training-needs analysis is then conducted for each person from the community nominated to work in the agricultural enterprise and an individual training plan developed for the purposes of individual skill development. The governance structure within each enterprise is strengthened by skills transfer in: communication protocols, setting and observing role responsibilities, financial management, workforce management and supervision and business reporting. This in turn helps to develop production and marketing strategies.

To date the successes include:

- 17 full-time jobs and 67 part-time jobs
- 1,245 training participations between June 2006 – June 2008
- 98% reduction in animal welfare issues
- 536% increase in herd size and 780% increase in herd value
- 272% sales increase, and
- 30 business plans developed and in operation.

### Background

Aboriginal corporations hold over 100 rural properties with varying potential for primary production in Western Australia. Over the past two years the operators of 64 properties have requested sometimes very substantial assistance from government. The support required mentoring, access to training and production advice and these were jointly funded by the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) and DAFWA. Thirty of the enterprises partner in a formal Aboriginal mentoring projects led by DAFWA. The successful Indigenous Management Support Service (IMSS) program formally commenced in 2002. Its concept was refined from an earlier pilot partnership arrangement with one of the Kimberley-based Aboriginal properties.

## Context of properties

As of December 2006, Indigenous land holdings in Western Australia were in excess of 2.5 million square kilometres - which is 14.5 per cent of WA's land mass. Much of this has been leased or purchased by government on behalf of Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal groups or an Aboriginal family or handed back from state lands. When the land has been divested to communities, groups or families the legal administration is under a Community Land Title, which is non-bankable. The land cannot be traded or used as collateral for a bank loan. Many of the properties on handover therefore required investments not achievable by the recipients. There was, and still is, a traditional expectation that pastoral operations are to provide jobs, a living area and income to support the group that could be just a family unit of six to a community of 500.

Aboriginal people holding farming or pastoral properties have the common goals of reconnecting their people to the land and culture, to gain an extra source of income for the community, to create jobs for community members and to develop profitable and sustainable animal or cropping production. Entry to a project is enabled when the directors of the property are committed to long-term goals and strategies agreed to by their communities.

### The DAFWA Indigenous Land Management Support Service

In Western Australia, the majority of farmers and pastoralists gain their production information from a wide range of sources such as agricultural consultants, farm days or production groups. Not many Aboriginals participate in such forums. DAFWA's Indigenous Land Management Support Service doesn't replace these extension services, but gives Aboriginals with the confidence to participate in those production forums if they choose to do so.

DAFWA has developed its Indigenous Policy Statement, which is now in its second five-year phase. The framework sets out the principles of engagement for the projects. By working collaboratively with Aboriginal land managers and other support agencies, DAFWA will strive to maximise available funding and coordinate efforts to assist self sustainability in land management and economic development in all Aboriginal primary production pursuits. DAFWA is committed to the improvement of Aboriginal wellbeing and recognises the role traditional land owners play in managing and utilising WA's agricultural and pastoral resources. This strategy is built on a commitment to:

- Establishing linkages and partnerships with the Aboriginal communities, individuals and other agencies to maximise DAFWA's capacity to work for indigenous land managers
- Reviewing and, where appropriate, re-engineering DAFWA policies, products and services
- Expanding indigenous employment, development and management opportunities within DAFWA
- Providing new services with a goal of equity of service and outcomes for indigenous clients.

When first developed in 2002, the Kimberley Indigenous Management Support Service was based on these commitments and strong partnership with the Aboriginal directors of the participating properties to build strengths in:

1. Production management
2. Marketing
3. Business management
4. Capacity building.

All DAFWA Aboriginal projects focus on a partnership approach to build and improve the economic capacity of indigenous-held land where the land managers want to pursue agricultural activity. The outcome is to develop the properties and their management into sustainable economic units and be employers within their communities.

Capacity building underpins the development of the business, giving confidence in all facets of farming and pastoral practice as well as business management. Innovative governance and business skills development were identified as being pivotal to the long-term success and sustainability of the properties. The governance, leadership and workforce management training is increasingly necessary to formulate more complex operational processes and to do this the Aboriginal company directors and the communities they represent need to determine:

1. Future directions for the businesses and how these changes would be managed in the context of community rather than individual ownership of its land base and company resources.

2. How to best employ these resources to allow the communities to maintain the integrity of their traditions and cultural inheritance.
3. To determine who would take responsibility for what and what were the roles they needed to play.
4. What needs occur in the operational and daily workloads for each part of the business.
5. What skills are needed? Who has them? Where are there gaps? How are the gaps going to be managed? Who is going to be trained, how and by whom?

While each property has an individual property workplan, a common thread exists in the approach within the projects:

1. Determining the strategic future of enterprise through:
  - scoping the community's and/or business director's ideas, wants, desires
  - reviewing the land capability, infrastructure, stocking or cropping potential
  - doing a gap analysis of land capability against community wants and desires revealing critical decision points for the ways forward.
2. Business development – based on decisions for a way forward through:
  - structuring the business
  - governance of the business, and the formalising of the business practice
  - setting and agreeing on the budget.
3. Production plans which set the production cycles:
  - yearly workplan with priorities for each season
  - inputs budget
  - marketing
  - production development plan.
4. Infrastructure audit – infrastructure plan:
  - what is currently there, water etc.
  - what is required, i.e. water points, irrigation, growing paddock etc.
  - plan for purchasing, maintenance or replacement of priority infrastructure
  - obtain funds, and if needed, assistance with writing of funding applications.
5. Training needs analysis – for the business and individuals:
  - skills needed by the business
  - skill available in the community, and within those people who will be working there
  - training needs
  - skills that will be bought in
  - broker the training.
6. Benchmarking against industry standards:
  - gap analysis and analysis of what needs improving.
7. Interacting with industry groups

Building capacity in Aboriginal community governance underpins all production development and aims to:

1. Educate and train members of the community to a standard and level of self-management that will enable them to run profitable and sustainable businesses and communities,
2. Provide board members of the enterprises with an understanding of due diligence, their roles and responsibilities as directors, and
3. Build the capacity in the community to understand business needs and to train themselves.

This integrated approach provides many outcomes and benefits to all involved. Seven years on and now into 2009, DAFWA has four formal Aboriginal capacity development projects:

1. The Kimberley Indigenous Management Support Service (KIMSS) with 15 properties formally involved and three who want to join.
2. The Pilbara Indigenous Management Support Service (PIMSS) with eight properties involved and one joining in May.
3. The Southern Agricultural Indigenous Landholder Service (SAILS) with 10 properties involved.
4. New Opportunities in Tropical and Pastoral Agriculture (NOTPA) with more than six enterprises involved.

The NOTPA project concludes in June 2009, and leaves as one of its legacies the transforming the pick of wild harvested Indigenous plants such as gubinge (a number of *Terminalia* species, but predominately *F. ferdinandiana* used traditionally in Aboriginal diets) into commercial harvest of cultured crops. DAFWA is interacting with a number of other properties that want or are waiting to join a formal DAFWA project.

The KIMSS, PIMSS and SAILS projects each work differently, reflective of the types of pastoral business or farms, the expectations of the groups and differing climatic and farming conditions. Many of the farms and pastoral companies or farms are located in very remote areas of Western Australia. Distance, community dispersal and for some properties almost total isolation during monsoonal conditions prevents a lot of travel and telecommunication, therefore the need is to work with directors and staff to develop a wider range of abilities which allow for on-going management and responsibility for achievement remains a priority with the group.

The projects are effective due to the commitment of the partners and the relationship formed between the directors and staff on the properties and the DAFWA officers. This is all underpinned by training which is in the majority organised from WA's capital, Perth, in collaboration between the DAFWA project staff and the directors of the properties. To ensure effective learning most training is conducted on-farm in real life situations with trainers selected for their expertise, their abilities to work with Aboriginal people and their willingness to form an enduring partnership with the people. The DAFWA officers are in the projects because of their knowledge, their ability to work for a developing business, and their ability to be accepted by their clientele. The staff work physically very hard and during mustering, shearing and harvesting often work seven days a week for sustained periods.

They become very much an integral part of the businesses, and at the request of the Aboriginal directors may sit of board of management (as non-voting members) offering formal advice to all members of the board. Such advice may include budgeting priorities, investment strategies and training needed to overcome major issues such as animal welfare.

### Training

As training is the underpinning element of the service it is crucial that it be the best that can be sourced. While still maintaining broad community wishes, trainers are required to work in community context. Of similar, or even more importance, the success of training was considered by the community to be better assured if it occurred within its traditional Aboriginal environment and culture, giving a learning experience that was comfortable, relevant and reassuringly applicable. It can take several months to put this training into place, and its success relies on solid planning, consultation between participants and trainers, and commitment by the enterprise directors and community elders. Not only do the trainers have to work in and around the on-going work of the station or farm, the learning resources had to be created and translated into a language and style that met the needs of all. The process that has proved successful for these communities, and has built community stake-holdership, is one that has had the right environment. The businesses were at the right stage of development for capture of external inputs and the need for consolidation before further growth occurred was recognised by all of the stakeholders.

They had also recognised that success was contingent on ownership of the change process by Aboriginal decision makers and that this was a complex process dependant on stakeholders regularly meeting, discussing and planning where there is:

1. A mentor or on-going point of contact for the directors and community and the workers
2. A director-appointed training committee to ensure planning and participation and total commitment by all
3. All resource materials prepared in styles, formats and languages that the community feel comfortable with, and can learn from
4. The best possible trainers who can form an on-going relationship with the directors and community
5. All stakeholders celebrating the success of the directors and communities when milestones are reached.

While production skills are important as 'tools' of the trade, it is strong governance which underpins business development and sustainability. In practical terms the impact and results of governance training are:

1. Improvements in governance as evidenced by:
  - A current constitution which reflects current financial and business activity and current membership of the companies

- Defined functions, roles and responsibilities
- 2. Constant reviews of budgets, strategic plans and cattle sales targets
- 3. Qualified community trainers, with Aboriginal people now training others,
- 4. A positive change in confidence and self esteem and consequent willingness to strive further to achieve higher goals
- 5. A thirst and eagerness for learning
- 6. Changing attitude to working in a business environment
- 7. Increased community morale and community members self esteem
- 8. The directors' pride, and this is summed up in one Chairman's (Dickey Cox) comment, 'This [business governance] is what we have needed for a long time",
- 9. The effects of the training are evidenced in the other businesses and conduct of communities. There is a spill over effect. If the business is improving and creating extra income, the associated community benefits in many other ways
- 10. Resource materials which meet Australian National Best Practice Framework and Guidelines for Advancing Reconciliation
- 11. A community feeling of well-being.

Where possible we seek formal qualifications for production skilling with Certificates and Diplomas in Pastoral Production and Natural Resource Management. In many cases the training will be non-credentialed but can be accredited through recognition of prior learning or recognition of current competencies.

To best illustrate the achievements of the projects, the following is a case study on job creation with the KIMSS project. Self-funding and sustainable work opportunities are welcomed outcomes of the projects. Jobs show that the input mix is correct and that mentoring partnerships deliver long term futures especially in job creation.

#### Job Creation

The Kimberley Indigenous Management Support Service (KIMSS) is a joint initiative of DAFWA and the ILC. It is the first time that significant financial, human and infrastructure resources have been delivered to Aboriginal pastoral enterprises in a planned and comprehensive manner. This was a major step forward for Aboriginal pastoralists and has allowed them to develop their own enterprises that have subsequently achieved a variety of economic, social and employment outcomes. KIMSS itself is made up of the project manager, three coordinators, one technical officer and three trainees. Of the eight staff, five are Aboriginal people from the Kimberley. It is expected that a further four Indigenous staff, in the Halls Creek area, will join the project team early in 2009.

Through the provision of a robust model for Aboriginal pastoral engagement, KIMSS has achieved excellent economic and production results and is responsible for a host of positive social outcomes across different Aboriginal stations. KIMSS has for several years facilitated fulltime, seasonal and part-time employment of Indigenous people by providing mentoring, training and management support to establish and build viable Indigenous pastoral businesses.

There is considerable opportunity for Aboriginal employment initiatives to dovetail with KIMSS. Many of the KIMSS staff are well placed to identify young Aboriginal participants for employment initiatives. In addition, KIMSS staff can help identify non-Aboriginal properties suitable for the placement of Aboriginal people and could suggest appropriate mentors for the employment programs. Indigenous corporations such Yungngora and Ngunjiwirri have strong working relationships with DAFWA. These successful relationships have resulted in increased productivity of the cattle enterprises, proving that Aboriginal stations can be productive when the right support structures are provided and with negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people and enterprises being successfully challenged.

In 2008 the project facilitated the employment of 86 Indigenous Kimberley workers in the Indigenous pastoral industry, 67 seasonal, 17 fulltime. Additionally, a further 19 were trained in the Halls Creek area with 15 finding employment in the mining, local government and pastoral sectors. This training was assisted and supported by KIMSS officers and Lamboo Station. A further five men were employed in contract mustering camps outside of the Kimberley in a joint management agreement setup by KIMSS between an Indigenous corporation and a pastoral contractor. In addition to this, six Indigenous men worked on a property near Derby with no pay at all, they were simply happy to see their property being managed for the first time in 27 years.

KIMSS has found the following principles critical in developing employment opportunities for remote Indigenous people:

- Ownership and Commitment - The cattle company is owned, managed, operated and staffed by Indigenous people with determination and commitment by the Aboriginal Corporation to work in the business in all aspects where they have the capacity to do so.
- Key People are maintaining Governance - The roles and responsibilities of key people clearly defined, with the capacity of the corporation directors enhanced to develop and implement sound management systems. Nothing is achievable without sound corporate governance.
- Training - develops the technical and management skills of Indigenous station directors, managers and workers for employment in the pastoral industry. Training pathways are developed to provide meaningful training and employment to the individuals involved. No 'training for training's sake'.
- Relationships - The relationship between the extension officers and the station owners, managers and wider community is critical. Extension advice and management support is provided by DAFWA KIMSS project staff, all of whom have pastoral experience and networks in the broader industry.
- Partnerships and Mentoring - Partnerships are vital to development of the business and creating employment options. An example of an important partnership is that between Indigenous Corporations and the ILC Land Management partnerships and support for infrastructure development. The KIMSS Indigenous Trainee Manager Program is a targeted mentoring program addressing a skills deficit area in pastoral management. Most KIMSS staff have mentored an individual whom they have watched grow and become a key person on the properties that they work on. Achievements at an individual level have engendered pride, self-esteem and confidence. The level of mentoring is significant.
- Responsive - Blanket approaches do not work; extension services must be sensitive to particular needs and issues. KIMSS program is robust yet remains flexible to respond to localised needs. KIMSS staff describes KIMSS as a community-grown, community-directed program.
- Stability - A core group of people have been involved on a regular basis with station operations began.
- Opportunity - The ongoing development of new employment positions all filled by local community members. Opportunities for employee career development with the enterprise offering higher level managerial and directorship positions. Opportunities for community members to develop smaller supporting business ventures, such as contract mustering and contract fencing.
- Tradition - The historical legacy of Aboriginal involvement in the pastoral industry is an important aspect of the KIMSS program.
- Self Determination -An independent commercial source of income broadening the economic base enabling community investment in new enterprises that will offer further employment and income streams. Currently employees of are engaged through the federally funded Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). Wages are complimented with a 'top up' or bonus that is apportioned by the directors to employees on an individual performance assessment. All pastoral operations KIMSS works with aspire to provide employees with an income equivalent to the award wage and move off the CDEP, a real wage rather than handouts.

## Conclusion

In Western Australia, Aboriginal economical development in agriculture and pastoralism has been facilitated by an inclusive, strategic and intensive support effort from the Department of Agriculture and Food. Many of the underpinning processes for sustainable development hinge on strengthening governance and strategic, culturally sensitive skill development. While DAFWA has regionally-based projects each with its specific emphases, there are strong common elements for success.

There cannot be enough emphasis given to the reinforcement of Aboriginal understanding and ownership of all strategies and processes and the recognition of the community's and the case workers' combined determination for creating profitable enterprises providing jobs on traditional lands and pride in this accomplishment.

## References

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