



National Drought Forum 2023

Not the Usual Suspects session transcript

(Duration 86 mins 55 secs)

26 September 2023

Introduction

This is the transcript of one of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's National Drought Forum sessions. This transcript is for the Not the Usual Suspects session, held at the Forum, 26 September 2023.

This session features Nina O'Brien, session Chair, and speakers Melanie Shannon, Melinee Leather, Ben Fee, Daniel Willson, Georgie Somerset, and Suzanne Thompson.

The panel features Nina O'Brien, panel Chair, and panellists Oli Le Lievre, Natasha Johnston, Dr Raelene Ward, Ross Blanch, and Sarah Parker.

Learn more about the [National Drought Forum](#).

Transcript

[Recording begins]

Nina O'Brien [04:08:25]

So, it's a 2-part session today. We will be having to get us kicked off, we'll be having 4 sessions. Each of those presentations will run for about 10 to 12 minutes each, and then I'll invite our panel members to the stage after that, to have some facilitated questions. There will be an opportunity to ask questions of our panel members at the end of that session as well. So, we do have a jam-packed session. We do have an hour and a half together. So thank you for participating and we will really try and run on time so we can get you to lunch appropriately. Okay. To get things started, I'd like to introduce our first speakers, the fantastic Barfield Producer Group. Melinee Leather is a founding member of the Barfield Producer Group and has worked in the beef industry for over 30 years. She is currently a partner of Leather Cattle Co., a family owned and operated sustainable beef business here in Central Queensland that has a deep sense of responsibility for how they contribute to global food security and climate action. We also have her fantastic, I was going to say sidekick, that's a bit cheeky, isn't it? Melanie Shannon and together with her husband, Alistair, own and operate a beef cattle breeding and backgrounding properties in Central Queensland here as well. So through her facilitation of the Barfield Road Producer Group, she enjoys the benefits of not only seeing her own business succeed, but recognises the importance of having many businesses actively engaged, allowing for an effective peer to peer learning structure.

Can you please put your hands together, and I welcome them to the stage. Thank you.

Melanie Shannon [04:10:24]

Good morning, I'm Melanie Shannon and today, Melinee Leather and I will talk about how we engage with our community to prepare, manage and recover from drought. Here's an overview of what we'll be talking about today. I'll provide you with a brief background about our producer group. We'll then cover the 3 themes of the Forum; building, so how we've built an engaged producer group, connecting, how we've personally connected with the group and how we've provided a platform for people to connect with each other. And partnering, how our group has partnered with local, state and federal groups and industry to achieve successful outcomes.

Just a little bit about our background now, we were formed in 2019, as Nina mentioned, Melinee was the Founder of our group, and our first meeting was a huge gathering. We realised a group style approach was something people were really interested in, as they saw the value in coming together to share experiences and knowledge to help each other succeed.

I've been facilitating the group since 2021 and have enjoyed watching the group evolve. The key drivers for the group, so the first one, we saw that the red meat industry's carbon neutral 2030 commitment was quite an ambitious goal, and working collaboratively with other producers made sense, as we could break this ambitious goal into smaller, achievable outcomes to find practical solutions.

The second driver was the 2019, as you heard earlier, and that we all know was a very hot and dry year. We knew that the climate was changing, resulting in hotter and drier seasons. We felt it was important to share our experiences about how we were dealing with these hotter and drier times, on each of our properties. Just a little bit about where we're based geographically.

So on the left hand of the map, we mostly have, most of our properties, are located on Barfield Road, hence the name. So that's around the Theodore-Mourah-Banana area. So that covers the Fitzroy Basin catchment. And then we also have a number of properties that are in the Burnett Mary catchment as well, to the bottom right of the map.

We now have 16 active beef and grain producing families that collectively manage over 50,000 hectares and 20,000 head of cattle. I'd like to acknowledge FBA for their assistance in developing this map. Informal structure, so we aren't a formal committee, which means we're not registered as an incorporated association or company. We meet in person every 3 months at each other's properties or at the local hotel and have an agenda. Actions are assigned with minutes being recorded.

How we've built our group to where it is today. Through planning, we have a strategic plan that has been developed collaboratively with the group. This has evolved over time to include more of a focus on health and the wellbeing of our families. And areas that have had great significance, include natural capital, carbon accounting and disaster management.

From here, individual businesses have developed their own plans and policies such as bushfire and drought management plans. Our vision is to create a sustainable future, through caring for our people, our land and our animals. Some of our goals are increased groundcover, biodiversity and soil health.

Communication is another way we've built our group. We communicate mainly through our Facebook page. However, we've found a phone call is an effective way of building rapport with members. It provides an opportunity for one-on-one, genuine engagement. Personally inviting them to our meeting often results in them attending. Supporting each other through tough times, such as drought, heavily relies on frequent consistent conversations that are approached with love and kindness.

Members have commented on how we offer a safe and supportive space where people feel valued and are able to share their experiences. A recent way of getting the blokes to talk more, was to conduct a project through The Soil Your Undies Project, which was initiated with Fitzroy Basin Association and Cotton Info. Of the 8 businesses that participated, it allowed for plenty of laughs and conversations about soil health, which we felt was an effective building block to other conversations.

Finally, we build our group through capacity. Firstly, through training and education, continuing education, which is one of the group's core values. 15 of us will soon be attending rain gauge workshops offered by the Northern Australia Climate Program, in conjunction with MLA. The 4 sessions will include climate and forecasting fundamentals, rain ready pastures, livestock management and strategic planning. Secondly, we build capacity through peer-to-peer learning.

We recognise the most effective way of learning is when we get together, share information, and help each other learn. Our most recent natural capital field day, we were able to show and explain how to measure a transect. By then having everyone work in small groups to identify species of grass, they were able to help and support each other. We believe these experiences have so much more meaning resulting in the retention and uptake of information. I will now pass you over to Melinee.

Melinee Leather [04:16:40]

Thanks Mel. So continuing with today's theme of building, connecting and partnering, I will now cover how the Barfield Road Group connects, why we connect and what are the outcomes of that connection and the role it plays in making us more prepared and resilient to climate extremes and disasters such as droughts, floods and fires.

The Barfield Road connects through building a community of purpose, bringing like-minded producers together in an environment that builds trust and support for continuous learning and improvement. We do this by using a peer-to-peer learning structure that embraces the uptake of new technology and innovation. By learning from each other we can improve our practices for increased productivity and better environmental outcomes.

A group environment not only gives us a sense of belonging, but often challenges our thinking. It allows us to learn, reflect and rejuvenate, which is critical during times of stress. Every member of the group has different skills, talents and interests, that collectively give us a rich tapestry of knowledge and insight that we use to achieve our shared vision of being an innovative producer group that is better prepared, and informed by increasing awareness, education, engagement, with a focus on sustainability.

We have learnt that by focusing on preparation, by planning, monitoring, recording and measuring, we can make informed decisions in a timely manner. Initiatives such as our Wild Dog producer

demonstration site are a clear example of how this model works. The group identified a problem after evaluating carcass feedback and noticing a 60% hydatid infection rate on cattle being processed at Teys Biloela, the cause being wild dog related. Wild dog action plans were developed for participating members in conjunction with the National Wild Dog Coordinator and FBA. Monitoring and recording was implemented using feral scan app. Fertility results in animal health traits were screened through blood tests and welfare data from the abattoirs. Training and coordination of control methods were implemented. This is where the power of the group is evident.

We had a real sense of purpose. 60% infection rate is massive. We could connect people to the best resources, National Wild Dog Coordinator, FBA and Teys. We used innovative technology with the feral scan app, and we received adequate training and tools for controlling the problem. Clearly, the connection within our group contributed to the success of the wild dog PDS, as it has on many other projects we work on.

We measure the success not only by improvements to our environment, animal welfare, productivity and profitability, but also our people and community. We know the work we do supports the health and wellbeing of our group and others, by giving them the support, skills and resources to make informed decisions earlier, rather than later. The Barfield Road Group is very aware that along with the connection of people to people we have within our group, we need to expand that by building and sustaining intentional networks externally, by having strength in numbers our group has the capacity to attract and influence external resources, which in turn not only benefits those in the group, but the broader industry and community as well. By consolidating the scale of participants, greater gains in efficiency and opportunity for societal change is being reached. More importantly, we can identify gaps in areas for improvement, trial ideas that we may not have the funds or confidence to try otherwise and provide a platform to share information and lessons learned.

This finding has been assisted by having extensive collaboration with a network of valuable partnerships. By collaborating with a range of private, government and tertiary organisations we get the tools and technology to collect valuable data and make informed decisions for improved management. Through participation in projects, producer demonstration sites, pilots, ongoing education and training, skills and resources can be gained to make practice change for improved management.

The strength of these partnerships is the increased ability to share knowledge, resources, ideas, skills and technology, for the greater good of the beef industry, both internally and externally. As Mel discussed earlier, one of the catalysts for the formation of our group was the red meat CN30 commitment. How could we make sense of the complexity and change required to manage this?

The group environment offered us a space of shared identity, belonging and support, a forum where we could share our worries and ideas and come up with tangible solutions. The partnerships we have built have enhanced our vision and given us opportunities, knowledge, skills, tools and access to technology to achieve this. The process of building skills, resources and practice change through collaboration is an approach that can be scaled at any level and has proven to be successful on many occasions.

And I think this quote from the Ken Blanchard and Randy Conley book, the Simple Truths of Leadership, sums this up nicely. No one of us is as smart as all of us. Thank you.

Nina O'Brien [04:22:02]

Thank you, Melanie and Melinee and goodness, what a powerful quote to finish on there and how true that is. You know, in preparing the notes for the session, Michelle said, look, just try and wrap it up in 2 to 3 points. Goodness. There's so much richness in that presentation. I think it's much more than 2 to 3. So just quickly, you know, the takeaways for me really, is that you don't always need a formal governance structure do you to get started on meaningful processes within your community. Having an individual, you know, plan at a farm level, but also what's important is really working at a community collective level as well. Frequent, consistent communication with love and kindness, goodness, how fantastic it is to hear words like love and kindness, in the context of drought preparedness. The collective building of skills and knowledge, I think holds real power, particularly in the context of, you know longevity of genuine preparedness that we're talking about. And finally, the strength of and importance of networks both within your community, but also connecting to knowledge sources and resources outside of your community are critical as well, so some really important key takeaways there. So I thank you sincerely for your thoughts and awesome timing, good on you.

Now next up, we are skipping right along to the Regional Drought Resilience Planning. So I'd like to introduce our next presenters who are from Regional Development Australia and look arguably the best state in Australia, being an ex-South Australian myself. Ben Fee is the Chief Executive of, just had to get that plug in there for SA fellas. Ben Fee is the Chief Executive Director of RDA Regional Development Australia, Murraylands and Riverland, and leads the organisation to support aspects of the region through some of the most complex and challenging times in living history. They're downstream from where I live, so you know, they do get some of the water that we do choose to send on down to you guys. We're also joined today too, by Daniel Willson. And welcome, Daniel. Daniel is also the Chief Executive of RDA York and Mid-North and so, adjoining regions? In South Australia? Close. Daniel was a professional economic economist. We won't hold that against you, Daniel, with deep experience across place-based economics, infrastructure, energy and public policy. Having worked as a consulting economist and economic adviser to governments, infrastructure firms, public sector agencies and financiers for more than ten years. So, Ben and Daniel have been busy doing drought resilience planning and are co-presenting on their experiences in developing those plans, which have been jointly delivered through the Future Drought Fund and the States and Territory governments.

So welcome to the stage. Put your hands together for Ben and Daniel.

Ben Fee [04:25:07]:

Do I need to speak to the lectern? Can everyone hear me? Okay. Oh, you're telling me yes. All right, fair enough. Fair enough, fair enough.

It was great to be welcome to Darumbal Country this morning and also to have those addresses that sort of brought the whole, 'this is complex' together. Yep. So we'll probably be going through the sequencing a little bit backwards here. We've got some partnering going on and we really like to recognise as well that doing the Regional Drought Resilience Planning work that both Daniel and I did in our separate regions, was actually largely thanks to PIRSA, in the state government through the agreements with the federal government, they actually passed it on down to us, which was fantastic.

We're a regional development body, as Dan leads as well. There's 53 of us across the nation, but we are all about place-based. We are all about on ground. And you suddenly start to see all the policy lines disintegrate when you're talking to someone about their mental health and their wellbeing or about their financial struggles. So, what we did with PIRSA handing on the opportunities to us, was we had the same funding. We probably took a very different approach and will probably explain a little bit of that, but ultimately what Daniel's pulled together is a slide that actually consolidates that we ended up in pretty much the same place and that's because we were eyeballing the people that we are eyeballing and it's funny, isn't it? It all comes back to people. So for us in the Murraylands and Riverland, so we do, thank you very much for the water that you send down our way, we really do appreciate it, we decided that the steering committee that we got given, were not the people that we necessarily need to listen to. We always listen to those people. They're the same, the usual suspects. So we asked them to find the less usual suspects that people who we ended up eyeballing and we spoke with them. We ended up going through about 550 people talking with them. We've got a population of 73,000 in our region, but 550 was pretty bloody good, especially when they all put in about 7 hours on average each. So it was deep, it was deliberative. What we heard back, and if you refer to some of the slides, I won't point to them directly because I'm not allowed to leave the lectern, Tthanks, Brett. What we heard was it's not just about drought. It's about more than it's the disruptions that we see, there were market disruptions throughout this time. Climate is a broad, encompassing element within that. Resilience is not just about drought, but a great way to enter, really important. We also found that there are different experiences that people have, and so we really need to meet them where they're at. Yep, it's not a one size fits all, but when you do come together, as we just heard as well, you can find collective solutions. People, just through the fact that they're connecting. And here I go, I'm getting to the second point of partnering and connecting, and that you actually see that people can self-realise, yep. So, we also heard really strongly that people want to be heard. They don't want another plan. Yep, they don't even read them, but they want to see you regularly. They want to see that connection. They want to feel like they've got someone there who's got their backs. And then, we got a point within our process, where we came to an end and we thought, alright, well what are we going to do now? Because in the first round there was no funding for implementation. And that's great because it was a bit pilot. So we had to bootstrap, and in our region, we then had through the FRRR, through the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the FRRR. We've got a program up in Community Impact program, now we're actually supporting 4 community groups who are all working to extend, do the implementation off the back of these plans that we pulled together.

So it's starting to happen, but we want to make sure that we have more there behind us so we can just keep blowing some more wind on that fire that's really starting to go, which is all about empowering our communities. Because we have great capacity to be able to sort it out ourselves. So yes, we are doing a lot of building already, but we could do with a lot of support to keep that building going and going strong. I want to hand over to you now mate.

Daniel Willson [4:29:24]

Thank you, Ben. As Ben touched upon, we did take very different approaches. So when we started our process, one of the things that quickly became apparent through our steering group and advisory group, was that significant sections of our region had come off the back of a really severe and prolonged drought through 2019, to the point where the precursor to the SA Drought Innovation and

Extension Hub had done some really significant and really good work. Speaking with people at that community level. And when we went back to those communities, those people, it became immediately apparent that they were tired. They didn't want to keep having the same difficult conversations around how they feel, how they are going, because they just felt like one. It's a hard thing to do. You don't want to talk about all those painful things all the time.

Secondly, if we'd persisted with the same approach, people would start to switch off and feel like they weren't being listened to the first time. So to avoid really starting to exacerbate those feelings of fatigue, one thing that we did very quickly was switch our approach around from a stakeholder engagement perspective, to speak to and bring in Tony Randall from the Drought Innovation Hub, to leverage the work that he'd led to get those insights, to get the benefits of those conversations early into the process, so that we understood what had happened, we had a comprehensive sense of what was already known, and then start to think about what else is needed, what else do we have to bring together? How do we stitch things together, to make sure that we're having a comprehensive plan, that we can go back and validate with people at the community level afterwards, so that we're not missing things, we're not re-prosecuting the same conversations with people who are pretty tender, but we do have a really solid, useful plan to go forward with.

So that gave us a really good opportunity to start to think about what blocks of information, data, evidence, conversations can we draw upon? So we've got some really high quality, long range climate change forecasts out of our Department for Environment and Water.

We've got the really significant community consultation work that was done through SA drought Innovation Hub and it's predecessor, and we've got a bunch of initiatives that have been developed through community wellbeing strategies, all of which addressed the symptoms, the challenges posed by drought. But the piece that was missing and the piece that we switched to was to how to bring that together to take a risk-based approach to understanding what are the risk factors and drivers of drought, how do they manifest, what types of priority actions need to be taken up to start to address those things?

And that's how we went about that process of putting together the Regional Drought Resilience Plan for the Northern and York region. So, a lot of that change was quite transformational. So we had farming systems that, and people, who came to the realisation that I can't be a cropper anymore, it's got to the point where I just cannot rely on rainfall anymore. So we had farmers of, you know, 7, 8 generations, selling down their equipment. I don't need to hold half a million-dollar header anymore, it doesn't make sense. It's a really significant change coming through from some of those people we started to think about from a risk-based approach, how do I need to start to thinking about my farm enterprise, what do I do going forwards, noting these risks coming at me?

And that's not to say that people stop being farmers, but they need to take a different approach. The types of conversations with individuals are in that regard, really, really differed. It was a massive difference. We've got rainfall in excess of 550 mils per annum, which doesn't sound like much up in Queensland, but to us it's massive, all the way down to about 270.

So really significant difference in farming systems, so making sure that we're having conversations around people's particular circumstances and particular systems to take a genuinely placed-based approach to make sure that what we're talking about made sense and individual circumstances, and

meeting them where they're at. That was really important. As an extension of that, thinking about the language that we use with people became really important.

So talking to people down the Yorke Peninsula about drought, they sort of look at you and get confused. Well, we don't get droughts, we always get rain, which is a really worrying thing to hear when you're having conversations about drought preparedness, but starting to shift the language, so starting to talk about drying, starting to talk about when does this season start, when do you get rain? How long is this season? Shifting that language slightly really starts to help people to engage in a different way. And then one thing that we did anticipate but pleasingly didn't see too much of was people switching off when we talked about climate change. Generally people engaged, but there were a few holdouts. So again, it's a shifting that language and talk about what does the soil moisture look like? How are you managing that? Just shifting those languages, approaching the same conversation from slightly different perspectives became really important, to get people to engage more so we could start to talk about the same risk factors, the same challenges that everyone faces in different ways, to make sure that people can think about from their perspective, what's going to work, what they need to do. And to touch on that relationships question, I think the first presenters made some really interesting points insofar as making sure that you've got trusted relationships with your peers, your neighbours, the people within your district who you work with, who are in similar situations. Using those trusted relationships became really, really important. One thing that came of it was for those communities who had Rural Financial Counsellors or mental health supports coming in. One thing that was really interesting was that people did not engage with strangers from Adelaide. They wanted to speak to someone who was local. They did not want to have some blow-in, come in and tell them everything's going to be better, you'll be fine. So having those people in community who are properly trained, properly resourced, always there who you trust becomes really important for having any of this to actually hit the road.

Got a bit of time up our sleeve. Probably the main thing to touch on, in the close out is, to give some time back because I think it's always useful, both Murraylands and Riverland teams and ourselves, we've had a really significant opportunity over the past roughly 2 years to put these plans together and we've been lucky enough that we've been able to start to push the implementation in a few different places. We've had to do that with some creativity. So FRRR being a massive support but also trying to access different programs coming out of federal and state governments around the Regional Precedents and Partnerships program, to start to push some of those different initiatives out to actually start to support the implementation of different priority actions out of our plans. One thing that we are conscious of is that we've been through a long process, we've had lots of conversations, so Ben had over 550 people he engaged through his project. We, through the Drought Innovation Hub, Tony had 360 through our process that took off the back of Tony's work we had another 270. We've had lots of conversations, lots of people, and we are conscious that it's been a long time since we put our draft plans together. So, the more we can do, as quickly as possible just to keep the inertia going, to keep things moving, to start to put some of these initiatives on ground, becomes really important so that people keep this front of mind and we can take up the benefit of what we've been able to put together, from a from a theoretical perspective.

So I think given the seasonal outlook that we've just received from the BOM this morning, we might literally get a burning platform that we can start to work on. If that seasonal forecast proves to be true, making sure that we've got resources available to us to support the implementation over the

next 18 months becomes really important. So it's an exciting opportunity for us to continue working with partners and continue working together to make sure we can actually push some of these initiatives onto the ground.

So that's probably all from us, but we will be around all day so please do feel free to get in touch with either of us, and we're happy to help. Thank you.

Nina O'Brien [04:37:10]

Thank you Daniel and Ben and it was fantastic to see another 5 of those Regional Drought Resilience Plans launched today. And I think where we can start working in a genuinely joined up way across the investment streams of the Future Drought Fund is where we'll start to see, you know, really strong dividends in communities.

So thank you for those thoughts. Look, some key takeaways for me on that what you've shared with us today is that it all comes down to people, doesn't it? Like it starts and ends there in terms of our personal relationships and the impacts that we make. Resilience is not just about drought. So, you know, we would be deeply foolish to go into communities thinking and talking about the fact that drought, you know, operates in a silo, in isolation, it's one of many climate impacts and other community stressors that are being felt right across Australia. Certainly, community fatigue is something that we hear a lot about and that we are very careful in how we engage communities in conversations. The importance of taking a systems base and whole of community lens is really critical to all of our work, I think. And you know, the final point for me was really about that notion of a trusted advisor and friend. So, while these are really hard things that we're talking about in communities, access to good risk-informed information, from someone that's local and trusted is really critical because it's only then really that we can start to make some of those really hard decisions that we sometimes need to make in drought.

So thank you for your thoughts and contributions today. Our third speaker today is Georgie Somerset from the Red Earth Community Foundation, a long-time friend of the Foundation of Rural and Regional Renewal, Georgie is speaking in her role as the Chair of Red Earth Community Foundation. So as you know, Georgie wears many hats, but a few of those hats is as the General President of AgForce Queensland, the Deputy Chair of the Royal Flying Doctor Service here in Queensland, a Director of the National Farmers Federation and a very valued board member of Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, as well as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Goodness, Georgie, when do you get time to sleep and do you ever, you know, go home as well as the Chair of a community-based foundation the Red Earth, out of the Burnett region. So welcome Georgie.

Georgie Somerset [04:39:53]

I thought I'd best wear the Red Earth shirt today so it's really clear about which hat I'm actually wearing. Thanks Nina and yes, a terrific welcome this morning to this country and this is for me only 5 hours drive. So it's actually quite civilised to just come up to Rockhampton. So thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about Red Earth Community Foundation. Drought is something I live and breathe, so I'm based on a cattle property an hour west of Kingaroy and I moved there in 89 and I think at the end of the millennium drought I said something like, you know, not even, yeah, well, 16

years, I've been married 16 years, and for 12 of those our property had been classified as being in exceptional circumstances.

This is something that I have lived and breathed. I did 7 years on the National Rural Advisory Council for those that will get PTSD when I talk about exceptional circumstances. But I guess it's what drives me to want to build some of our resilience. Oh, what am I using here? And so, community foundations are a philanthropic structure enables communities to support themselves and there's about 40 across Australia. The Red Earth Community Foundation covers the Burnett Inland, and that just gives you some geographic context for those, and it is so fantastic to have people from interstate and out of this region here. There was a lot of local references Melanie and Melinee would have noticed in the politicians' speeches this morning. And I thought, but we've got people nationally here, which I think is really exciting. I know from Tassie, I'm not sure about WA, but that's the Burnett Inland and we tap into sort of the Bundaberg area. We're not far from Toowoomba. It's a strange sort of section of the state, but incredibly rich in its resources. So, for the Red Earth Community Foundation, we established 13 years ago and at that time we'd just had a significant flood which gave us an opportunity to see how a community foundation could support its own.

I'm sorry, 13 years ago we started, 10 years ago we were incorporated, which said that I could go to the Mayor and say, let's run our own flood appeal. And it was my first chance to show that a community can back itself in tough times. So some of you will remember the 2013 floods that wiped out Bundaberg. Those waters came from the Burnett Inland, they came from Monto, they came from the Bunya Mountains. That's my country. And that all flows up to the Paradise Dam and Bundaberg through the Burnett Mary Regional catchment. So our vision at the moment is about growing and even better Burnett Inland we've had a few iterations, but we just want to keep making it better. And we exist to invest in people, as the vehicle for change, for the betterment of the Burnett Inland.

Both of the previous presenters have talked about people. So many of the conversations this morning from the politicians were about people. For us, it's about a foundational investment in people. I'm not going to expect you to read this, but this is from our Burnett Inland Future's Report. It's about what we see ourselves as is a backbone structure. Some of you may know the Coffin Foundation in America, and they talk about being a backbone for their community. One of my co-founders, Karen Siler, talked about intergenerational leadership. So we want to lead as a community foundation, not for this generation, but for our grandchildren's grandchildren. In my time as Chair, I've been through, we cover 3 local areas, I've been through 8 mayors in those 10 years we're essentially still driving the same vision and mission. It's critical that we have structures that can enable us to think in the 30, 50, 100-year time frames, and that's what a backbone can do. This is one of our foundational pieces and it comes back to what you've all talked about, this is the 10 years of our community leadership program. I was blessed to be part of the Australian leadership programs CORE 16. One of my gifts back to our region is that annually we hold a community leadership program. It's residential in the Bunya Mountains. We use some foundational things from Building Rural Leaders, but we took principals from Australian Rural Leadership Program as well, where we have a rich matrix. We do have at least one alumni here today, possibly more, but they're from local government, they're from agencies, from agriculture, they're from our power station, they're engineers, they're social workers. We've got significant disadvantaged in our region. They're in sport, they're in music. We really want to make sure we're not just in Ag, we're not just in town, we're not just in the bush.

We actually have a really rich and diverse community. But in that very first leadership program where some of the funds came from flood recovery, I had people who'd just moved to town working in social work, who didn't understand how the floods had affected farmers who'd lost all their production, and some of those farmers had no idea of the disadvantage that our youth face, and this was 10 years ago, with homelessness and homelessness and unemployment and addiction.

And so this cross-threading to me is just so critical. So that's the 10 years of our community leadership program. And it is it is one of the highlights of my year. It's 2, 3-day residential, my gig is that I cook. I now have other people to help in the kitchen. For the first 3 years, there were 2 of us that did all the cooking. The people who helped run that program, we have professional facilitators, but the rest is volunteers. So those people come back and reconnect with the new alumni, and we now have over 200 to 220 people in our region who've got the foundational principles of leadership, how to work together, how to manage change, how to build resilience with each other. And I see them positively influencing our whole region. And that to me is a critical part of what we do.

What drives us first and foremost is making sure we've got a values alignment. We have to have courage to collaborate. We've talked about those connections today, absolutely critical. We want to flip the hub and spoke model. What we recognised was that we are a hole in the donut. We're surrounded by big towns, Bundaberg, Toowoomba, Harvey Bay, Sunshine Coast, and we're surrounded by highways that people travel, the Warrego and the Bruce, but we don't have them. So we wanted to show that the hole in the donut can actually do amazing things, that people eat the donut to get to the amazing flavour in the centre and then we want to make the flavour in the centre actually part of the reason for being. We believe it's the people that will actually drive that. We know that we're not the only hole in the donut. I grew up at Winton, in Western Queensland. I know what it's like to live remotely. I live an hour from town even though I'm only 3 hours 45 on a not so bad day to Brisbane. It sounds quite close. You know, in Queensland I'm very close to Brisbane but I'm also, you know, it's not easy, and so there are other holes in the donut all over Australia and we want to try and flip that. I just thought I would touch on the things that we believe help us build a community led organisation. Just back on the hole in the donut, one of the things we did do was work for the Rural Economy Centre of Excellence, and I'm not sure if anyone is here. Dr. John McVeigh is here, who certainly is part of that team. But Chad Renando did a research report for us on the hole in the region, the Burnett Inland Futures Strategy, and that really underpins a lot of what we do because it's given us the data to communicate the degree of opportunity, and yet overlook that happens for the hole in the donut. To build a community led organisation, hmmm, it takes time, takes courage as well. You have to allow diverse voices to be heard. That's really complex because we are attracted often to people like us. We have to be quite deliberate about being around people who rub us up the wrong way and make us feel uncomfortable about the conversations we're having. And that takes courage to build collaboration, with diverse points of view.

In contrast to the Barfield Road Group, which I absolutely love, is that we do need a structure because we're wanting to provide that intergenerational leadership for the whole region. FRRR has been absolutely critical for us in that, and in initially helping us get the community foundation off the ground, but also currently hosting a sub-fund for us which provides deductible gift recipient status for those donations, and throughout the 10 years for partnering on all sorts of things, large and small, for the for the organisation.

You need commitment. It's been 10 years of investing in people through leadership. You have to allow the space for creative solutions. During COVID, we really noticed the gap when people couldn't get together, and yet life was going on as normal, like most regions. So we ended up hosting a series of webinars because everyone said we are sick of talking about COVID. You know, that's fine, that's happening. But can we just talk about what we're going to do from this? So we hosted a series of webinars and we brought in external people on those webinars, but we also had some of our leadership program alumni gave them an opportunity to talk about their vision for the region. So we had people like Cathy McGowan come on and ARLF worked with us on those things and I think Nat may have been on one of them as well. Nat Egleton from a FRRR. So we wanted to give people, want to create a space again for conversations to happen. So we're trying to think creatively about the different ways that you allow these things to happen. Even when everyone says that nothing can be done, well, let's find a way to let it keep happening. One of our biggest challenges is that we have no preconceived idea of what the future holds.

And if you'd said to me 10 years ago that we'd be in conversations with renewable energy companies about, long term community-funded solutions, we would have thought that was pretty ambitious, but so would I have thought that was ambitious to be hosting an annual leadership program in our little region. And we're the only community leadership program hosted annually in the same region every year. There are some that move around, there are some that are sectorial, but we are the only community leadership program in Queensland, that's delivered annually.

Sorry, I missed the second part there. Those who are willing to strive along with us to determine it. So, it's about those people that turn up. Decisions are made by those that are in the room. You've turned up today, it's part of making the decisions. I'm just touching on the building drought resilience and I will link in some of the things around the Future Drought Fund and the work we've been doing there. So we are, we're collaborating significantly with FRRRR on several things. And yesterday was the Emergency Forum in Canberra with NEMA.

I find it bizarre that they're being held at the same time, because NEMA is actually funding resilience through FRRR, with us, so NEMA is funding FRRR, and FRRR is then partnering with Red Earth on that program. And that's called Disaster Resilient, Future Ready. And actually, Nina could speak in far more detail about this and I won't try and do all the details, but essentially the partnering we're doing there, and Minderoo are also supporting this project, is we're enabling communities to actually identify what resilience looks like for them.

And this is really tough work. It's really easy to fill out a grant when you're given the guidelines, we'll fit our project to fit those guidelines. Well, they said they wanted kitchen. Well, it's kind of going to be a kitchen if we had the office desk as well. We're actually saying this is a blank sheet of paper and you get to think about what will resilience look for your small community.

And we're going with really small communities that don't have a council office, often. Actually one of them I don't even think has a school. So, this is tough work, because we want you to tell us what is the project you want us to fund? To be disaster, resilience and future ready. What does it look like for you?

And we're learning that that takes a bit of time, doesn't it Nina? And I say, I'll just go back to some of the upcoming other projects we're doing. So, this is a 3-year project because it does take time. And

just quickly, some of the other things we're working on. We're also partnering with FRRR on the Community Impact Program, and from that we're also developing a community leadership program for the Cherbourg community, and working with the Australian World Leadership Program on a southern Queensland-led community leadership program, which will happen early next year. For anyone from the Southern Downs, Goondiwindi, Western Downs and Toowoomba, I'll put in a plug for that one. We've had some co-design and training funding from BBRF because I believe strongly in us trying to invest in the facilitation capacity so that we've got people trained in being able to hold tough conversations in safe spaces.

And last year we kicked off an annual Leadership Forum. So last year our keynote speaker was Barry Irvin from Bega, who have a footprint in our region. And this year we're continuing some of the themes that Barry started to seed with us around the circular economy in Bega with the redesign and circularity. So that's on the 31st of October in Murgon.

We've got a really interesting lineup of both locals and people from outside the region, but really challenging us to think about what is it that we grow and transform to? The other big conversation we're having is about our own futures fund. So we've kicked off a futures fund as our 10 year and we're having the conversation. So we have one wind farm built, one in construction and around 3 to 4 that I know of at the moment.

But someone described it to me yesterday as like eureka in our part of the world, we're in the renewable energy zone. Everyone's got their pick and shovel. They're just very, very big picks and shovels. And so we are seeking to collaborate with the developers and the proponents, that we don't just end up with lots of barbecues at tennis courts, but that we actually have an ongoing community investment for the life of these renewable projects.

These are actually community owned and managed, and seeing the community foundation is an opportunity to partner with them on those rather than people who've not got a connection with the community. Conscious of time. For me, the challenge for government and NGOs to enable community to manage, is that it takes courage and it takes time to listen to community. We've talked about that with the DRF process.

It takes courage to support communities. It takes time to do that as well, to work out what it is that they need, and to get them to actually think. I am concerned that since, someone said to me, since the 70's, but certainly in my existence, certainly since the mid-90's, don't worry about that, will do it for you we'll turn up, we'll bring the food you just you know, you be there, and people didn't worry and they stopped turning up. And we're dealing with the sort of 30 year apathy of being done in communities.

And what we're trying to do is engage and support without enabling, without rescuing. And this is really complex and it's going to be how we build the resilience not only on our agricultural properties but in our rural regions so that we can actually drive our economies industries about 2 years ahead of policy and process, I believe. And what we have to work out is how you enable community and how you actually allow them to have more courage to take the step to invest and go forward.

But we really need to allow the space and the time, for communities to work out what it is that they want heard. Thank you.

Nina O'Brien [04:55:48]:

Thank you, Georgie and Red Earth. Goodness, what a small but mighty organisation and a fantastic example of one of many community foundations that exist right around regional Australia. The key takeaway points from Georgie's, you know delivery, look, I think the importance and strength of locally based backbone organisations is critical in the communities where we live. Investment in people builds that critical momentum that's required and that takes, also takes time. For those of us that sit in policymaking settings or investment where we are making investment decisions, it's being really cognisant of where those holes in the donut exist.

I certainly grew up in one of those holes in the donut in Western South Australia. Goodness. You know, it's stark. The importance of research for really strong advocacy for small organisations like that that actually enable you to have really strong voice with an evidence base in front of decision makers is really critical. Also, let's not shy away from those tough conversations that we need to have, particularly with those people that do rub us up the wrong way, you know, particularly in this national conversation that we find ourselves in at the moment. The real challenge is how do we do that respectfully and in a way that we can move forward?

And finally, of course, communities don't want to be done to, they want to have very strong agency in their own decision making and defining what their futures. So thank you, Georgie, for your thoughts today. Our final panellist is Suzanne Thompson.

Suzanne is the Chair of the Australian Native Food and Botanicals. As well as her current role, Suzanne is also the national Co-Chair for the Statement of the Heart Working Group. She was born and raised in, now forgive me if I get this wrong because I am a from New South Wales and South Australia, Barcaldine, did I get that right, and has returned to country after 20 odd years of working with government agencies and private business enterprises.

For the most part, she's worked in areas of youth and policy development, community development and an Indigenous business advisor, along with of course, volunteering opportunities that come with working in all regional communities. She's a board member of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services Board, Noosa Biosphere Board, Committee Member for the Desert Uplands Committee, founding member of Yambanku Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development Aboriginal Corporation.

So can you please join me in welcoming Suzanne?

Suzanne Thompson [04:58:39]:

I think that was an old bio, but that's okay. Thank you. It's amazing I think what social media and the internet does, we can be Googled up and we have to be really careful what we do and the things that we do in community because it sort of pops up everywhere.

I think I might start with the video, if that's okay?

(Video voiceover begins – not accurately transcribed/inaudible)

In terms of very caring and good role, you'd like to see that the new company is very remarkable, forgotten. I've been part of your culture to help that environment. I just became the company. Parents and my crew were equal, not the people putting out. You know that. But you know what?

If you give me, I'll that the young man I am the practical version of version and I have my turn. I remember my heart is yeah knock it out that hey months ago I was one of the companies I couldn't my whole and the company got blown right away. Okay. Oh, that's very grounding. Okay.

That shows that. You know what? Second, this is actually something that can make a difference not only in our neighbours country, but also in our country and also in your country, wherever you from. Even in the last few days that we've been water as well, we're seeing more homes come by here. I've never felt closer to the country than I have in the last couple weeks.

It's amazing. Experience has taught me the value of caring, comfort and the real value of why you should care for the country as not only just an indigenous person, but anybody that needs from this country because to collect things from amongst us so that we all have a sacred place that connects us through the more we're comfortable around this country or in this continent.

So, you know, it's what brings us all are whoa, let your heart and the heart of the and then the water lies in the why they go out and across the country. It reminds me are you on that theme, this living organism that's out there that feeds us. And so with our heart is clogged up and dried up and silted up and can't bring the war and the violence can't bring the country sick bay country.

So could you imagine not one more focus. You've got your kind of work. You've got to have great marketing other people to team up with you.

(Video voiceover ends)

Suzanne Thompson [05:02:03]:

So I thought I'd just set the scene a little bit because I think firstly, for me [Traditional language]. So I say, it's a good day today and I'm from Iningai Country, but I acknowledge Darumbal Country and the [inaudible] and you know, the Yuna Yuna, their old men and their old women.

And for me, I suppose, as I wear a hat of the Australian Native Foods and Botanicals as a First Nations woman, as the Chair of this peak body, it was important for me to be able to present a space that understood us as a people and who we are and what governs us in the way we think in this world and why we survived for so many millennia.

And so that sort of sets the scene for us. For us, I suppose, it was a rainmaking ceremony. The value that we have when it comes to caring for country is how we sustained our country into the future. Part of that, what is within that environment, that sustained us through our health and wellbeing. So that's our supermarket. When we see a tree, when we see something and always talk about the Bloodwood tree, and I call it my Bunnings tree, or I call another tree the homemaker centre, because when we have an understanding of these 6800 botanicals that Australia is unique to, that house so many opportunities out of one plant.

We have dual opportunities that can come through those things. So also for me as a healer, as a matriarch and a healer within my community and my role, and my birth role, bush foods and

medicines are my passion, country is my passion, because of I can't care for country, I can't heal my people. And so those are the things that are really important.

So hence then I ended up becoming a member of the Australian Native Foods and Botanical Board, as a Director. And then of course, the last 2 years, going on 3, as a lone Chair in that space. But it was important because ANFAB was always seen as a non-Indigenous organisation and these bunch of white fellows are out there and they're running amok with all our knowledge and they're going to create this industry and they're going to take it away from us.

So it's important for me to sit within that tent, to go no, we have to do this together because we all live on this continent together. And I walk with the knowledge that our old people knew that all the other colour fellows were going to come, and it was up for us to learn to up, their world and our world, because we will come to a point where we will need to walk together to survive together into the future.

So, sustaining our future. I think we've got...right. Pressed the right button? This one. This one will do. So we are a peak industry body. So they've been around quite a long time, actually about 30 years. And our industry is unique in that it deals with our natural environment through the understanding of and botanicals whilst promoting First Nations people of this great land we all call home.

Now, what have I done, sorry, got it. We also promote leadership and economic development. So one of the things that I think we also are aware of, as a peak industry body, was the desire and aspirations for First Nations people to be a part of this, if not lead in this space, and if not, benefit economically from this space.

And it excited me hearing how we talk about, and we've heard throughout this about community coming together, about the connectedness, about resilience, about how we as a community are starting to forge our way into surviving drought, into the future. So of course we know that the commercial, as we also promote leadership and economic development and commercial production across the whole of the agricultural and horticultural sectors, and now the very notion of the new nature recovery markets and carbon markets.

It is part of the new and emerging industry portfolio supported by Agri Futures and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. So we know we've heard about net zero. One of the things that we are aware of is that when we see drought, and I remember doing a bushtucker session whilst we were still in the midst of drought at home in Barcaldine, and I went out to the town common and I came in with 28 specimens, of things that I harvested off country whilst we were in drought.

So, to be able to share that knowledge and to be able to show that, to say hey, this is what we have to do, this is how our people sustain themselves into the future for those many millennia. So of course, who sits with me, and we are made up with a range of different people on our board. Being able to now, being the first, I was the only First Nations member on the board when I first arrived, to know that we've got a very good balance.

One of the things, though, that I, I suppose, that I look at and I'm really proud of is having Bergi Steffensen on there and Bergi, being a pharmacist archaeologist. I think I'm going the wrong way or not? So Bergi being a pharmacist archaeologist, and one of the things for the Australian bush foods

industry, is that Australian botanicals are only seen as novel, because if we're starting to think about exporting, if we're starting to want to be seen as an industry, how do we get something marketable? How do we commercialise something? It's seen as a novel product.

For First Nations people, we don't necessarily have, I don't know, 3 or 4 generations of a great grandmother that's written a recipe down because she's used something. But what we do have is we have tens of thousands of years of knowledge, of understanding how to remove toxicities out of plants. And one of those things I like to share is around the black bean. And the black bean, for instance, you harvested the black bean, then you pound it, roasted it, then you put it in a basket of water, and you run it through that basket of water in the stream for about 3 weeks, till it fermented. Then you took it out and then you roasted it, pounded it, roasted it, and then you were ready to make your cake.

So, I often think about our old people, and I think, how did you know that? Because we didn't have the machines. We didn't have all of the research laboratories and all the things that we have today. Who was that guinea pig? And our people talked about that, the ancestors spoke to them and told them through their dreaming stories. So, I'm going to take us on a little bit of a journey of then understanding our lore.

L-O-R-E, lore. And we as First Nations people, when we understood our bio regional structures and our migratory bird patterns and our watersheds, was from those ancient teachings. So Uluru and Kata Tjuta, if we think of the first layer, and I'll call it a layer as an analogy, the Old Testament layer, the creation of our cultural landscape. So, we know the Seven Sisters, [inaudible]'s the big trickster, he's chasing them.

He could be a whirlwind, he could be all sorts of things. This started out at Uluru and Kata Tjuta. And Uluru and Kata Tjuta are mud pies in that story. So the little boys are there playing. And of course the whirlwind comes and the sisters go 'quick run!'. So they finish that mud pie and they go and they get another one and they start.

But he's coming through more. And of course, to learn the whole story is well over a month through our ceremonial practices of becoming lore keepers. So of course, then we take that, and we move and we go, and we've got Mount Connor, we have the MacDonnell Ranges, we can go. And then every landmark that we all know of and celebrate, whether it's the Three Sisters in the Blue Mountains, whether it's the Glasshouse Mountains, whether it's Mount Archer, they all are part of the creation of our highway, which was our cultural landscape.

But within that and the stories that came within that, because he was naughty. So the women would do things or there would be something that would happen. We would have an understanding of a soil type that told us where medicine plants were going to be, where food plants were going to be. So these were all these teachings through our lore, that we learned as we went through ceremony.

They're the things that we want to gift. They're the things that we want to share, because we've held them for so long. One of the things that I think of then, as the landscapes created, and the highways created, I start to think about those watersheds and how did them old people have that understanding? So then we go to the next level, which was the New Testament level, the birds and the plants.

And so of course [inaudible]'s tricking. And he's doing all sorts of things. And then the women go, and they might go off and do something and there's something else that might happen. There might be 2 dogs over there. We hear about butterfly dreaming, we hear about all of these dreamtime stories, and they are relevant and strongly connected to our lore story, that created our landscape.

Where I live in Central Western Queensland is the coastline of the ancient inland sea. I'm witness to see these things, to see the evidence of this stuff etched on a wall. But what Bergi brings us, when I talk about toxicities and novel, is that as a pharmacist archaeologist, she can do residue extraction from artifacts. So if we've got grinding stones and we can validate that we used millet grass, that we used the ancient grains that we hear about. Australian native rice is the original genus for all rice around the world, and as food security, Australia is key to that.

We know that all of diseases that are coming through, that some of the rice, the food security, the soil types, the climate change is all impacting on these things. But Australia is very, very unique to that. But our First Nations people and our knowledge is unique to that. I'm very passionate about my industry, because I believe that it needs to be an industry that's taken seriously, and I believe that it's an industry that is going to assist us into the future.

So, in saying that, then we go into our vision. So we're an ethical, inclusive, prosperous Australian bush foods and botanical industry. To grow opportunities and solutions for our Australian bush foods and botanical industry is our mission. Our core values are to respect commitment and advancement. And then this is our strategy on a page. Lots there, but we'll break it out.

So, when we think about our people and partnerships, and I heard a lot about that, in partnerships and how we come together. People in partnerships, so building productive relationships with First Nations organisations, government research institutes and other industry bodies. So if I think about one of the, I suppose strategies that we embarked on, was bringing critical thinkers together and creating a national think tank group to actually decide, is this body, are we relevant? Do we need us into the future?

And what are the layers and the building blocks for us to address the next 10 years? So we're showcasing the work of our members through partners, across our industry and beyond, and then connecting our members to new partnerships and opportunities. And then we have a strong network of people, businesses, researchers, industry partners and government supporting an ethical, inclusive and prosperous industry.

And we can go on. But I can, and I think I'll share the slides and stuff around this because I think it's about the industry being taken seriously. I like to share stories about the industry because it's the aha moments. If I think about 980 wattle species in Australia that I know that we have, wattle sequestration, that nitrogen is fixed because of wattle.

So as a landowner doing HIR carbon farming in the desert uplands region of Central Western Queensland, as a practitioner, I'm realising all of these realities, because I'm getting to practice and re-practice my cultural practices. So as we do that, we're burning country, we're learning to understand when we cool burn. And we now know that when we burn and February, it's going to give us herbage, but when we burn in October, but there's a formula with that, we're going to get wattle.

So what we're learning, is we're learning at the different times of the year when we do a traditional cool burn, and it has to be a traditional cool burn, and we don't burn and our desert uplands region until we get something like 30 mil of rain.

So that that very knowledge and that ability to practice is something that we're able start to then move within our industry, and I suppose, assert the opportunities that are ahead for us. So of course, policy and practice, so again, we need co-designing, we need partnerships. We have been reaching out for a long time, for investment in the industry, where we've had, probably no response because again, as a non-Indigenous organisation, the perception of a non-Indigenous organisation that now has 50/50 Indigenous board members, it's now on us to be able to go and secure that into the future.

Market and trade. So there's one, just quickly with the market and trade area, and we did a piece of work around developing the free, sorry, the free trade agreement with the Indigenous inclusions. And we put 5 botanicals up because the challenge is, is that we hear First Nations people saying that it's our IP, it's our trademark, it's our benefit, and we know of Nagoya protocols and we know that through all of this benefit sharing and everything that comes back royalties, how does this work?

Because if we get caught up in a legal system, from a cultural knowledge, and that's why I set the scene of understanding, our lore, that governs the values that drive First Nations people. So we have an understanding of all of this, but then we've got to try to get the L-A-W law to understand when we want to protect something or how we get the benefits out of it.

So what we did is we put the 5 botanicals up and we put macadamia nut up was a good classic. So we know macadamia nut is already out there. But what we do know is it's called the Bauble Cassia, which is unique to the Gympie region of the Gubbi Wakka people. So therefore like the French did with champagne, and they used the geographical indicator of their soil that gave us the opportunity then to think about what we can start to provide for First Nations people when it came to them or comes to them to want to be a part of this industry. Because we don't want to take away the macadamia industry.

It's not about that. It's about what is unique to us, what makes it unique to that mob, because that's what we traded, because we come back to that lore that I talked about, that I talked about in that New Testament, the animal in the plant world. Our ancients knew by origins, watershed years. They also knew migratory patterns. Why we have songlines, why I'm connected to all the Emu people.

Because I guarantee all the Emu people, and their totem would be all part of an emu migratory pattern. We know that that's what we've weaved us through. So that's why then for us then when we thought about the French model for the GIs, then that gave us a better opportunity for our First Nations people. And then also information distribution and then investment and growth.

And then the last piece I suppose with the investment and growth part, is that if I was to realise and create the wish list for this national peak body of a voluntary board, trying to drive something into the industry is, not only do we have opportunity for carbon sequestration, we have an opportunity to respond to drought. We have an opportunity to also look at dual income streams when it comes to being a land holder like I am. We need some serious investment, and we need it now, if we're going to be part of this conversation. So, thank you.

Speaker [05:19:50]:

Thank you, Suzanne, for those really critical thoughts and that really deep wisdom that you bring to the subject. Thank you. Now we are running a little behind time. We do have a half hour session, though I know we are running into lunch, so we will try and streamline it a little bit.

What I will do is invite to the stage a fantastic host of panellists, Oli Le Lievre, who is the founder, as you've heard this morning, of the Humans of Agriculture. Welcome, Oli, welcome to the stage. Also Natasha Johnston, Founder and Chief Angel of Drought Angels, welcome. Dr. Raelene Ward, who is the knowledge broker for the First Nations engagement at the Southern Queensland and Northern New South Wales Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub for the Future Drought Fund, which is, I am sure, the longest job title in in Australia, perhaps. Sarah Parker. Also welcome, Sarah, who's the Chair of Goulburn Broken Cash Management Authority, which is just down the from me in the fantastic Golden Valley, Australian Women and in Ag, a whole bunch of interesting and cool stuff.

In 2022 Sarah was recognised as the Rural Community Leader of the Year. And finally, Ross Blanch, Farmer to Lifeline Farmer Crisis Supporter. Welcome now is there a chair there? Oh awesome. Thank you Stu, for a bit of coaching on the side there. And we're going to take a slightly approach to the session today. So all those fantastic notes that Michelle has sent through to you just ignore every single thing that she's sent.

Okay, So we're going to take a group panel discussion process. So across to you all and you can, you know, have a fistfight or what have you need to do in terms of sorting who will actually answer. But this question is to all of you. We commonly see the same people and groups stepping up and engaging in community initiatives relating to drought preparedness or otherwise.

We all know that communities are stronger when they're inclusive. How do we engage and encourage participation from a wider cross-section of the community, both in-person and online? And is there a distinction for that, perhaps, and Oli I might come to you second, but perhaps one of our other panellists can talk about how we engage diverse participation in some of these important community decisions that we need to make?

Raelene Ward [05:22:38]:

Well, I'm happy to lead, being the Aboriginal representative up here. So, for First Nations people, it's important that a lot of our engagement and planning is underpinned by, you know, Article 3 of the UNDRIP, which is the Declaration for First Nations people. So it speaks to, you know, First Nations people having the right to self-determine and be involved in decision making.

It's also about making sure that we're not just engaging one particular group. So in my role, I make sure I engage every Traditional Owner group, every knowledge holder, every custodian across Queensland, New South Wales, and I make sure that their views and their opinions are being heard, and raise those at some point.

Sarah Parker [05:23:45]

I could probably comment a bit around the virtual aspect of things. So I'm an incoming Chair on what's called Goulbourn Broken CMA, one of the NRM regions in Victoria, and we're one of the largest environmental water orderers, irrigators, and during the review of our regional strategy was when we had 3 years essentially of lockdown in Victoria, and we actually had during that time period

some of the largest numbers, and different people within our community engaging in that review, and they did that by doing things differently online.

We often had facilitators that were different to the normal facilitators used during the face-to-face engagement. We used formats that people could engage with us where it was led by those online, not led by those of us wanting the information. And we also engaged with all people in our community. Everyone makes an assumption that it's the irrigators that lead to the regional catchment strategies and the regional catchment projects.

It isn't, and it's everybody that lives, breathes and works and even visits the region. So that includes Traditional Owners, leading that process. We also engaged with our non-English speaking settlers and people that are just coming into the region. So it's important to just cast your net wide and listen, and also don't go in there with questions that you want to ask.

Instead, let them tell you what they want.

Natasha Johnston [05:25:24]

I think from a not-for-profit space, getting volunteers is getting very hard. We've got a very much aging demographic are our only volunteers at the moment. So I think we really need to hone in on our younger generations, and teaching them the value of volunteering, and that what your time can mean to whatever organisation or whoever it is you're volunteering to.

But we've got a school coming out from Brisbane and this is the second year that they've been out and they're bringing their students out. They come out for 3 days, we take them onto a farm, they learn about whatever farm that is we're going to. They actually do volunteering on the farm, that might be fixing fences. And these kids are just so engaged and enthralled and want to learn more about where their food is coming from.

So I think we've really got to do some more in that space of, yeah, with our younger people. And even with schools, I know a lot of private schools actually run volunteering, they'll take they'll take the kids out to nursing homes, all those sorts of things. But I think in the public school system we probably really need to look at honing in on volunteering opportunities in that space.

Nina O'Brien [05:26:36]:

Thanks, Ross, what's your thoughts on how to engage diverse members of the community, particularly those that you know and not those shouty voices at community meetings, perhaps?

Ross Blanch [05:26:46]:

Yeah, with me, I've been a crisis line worker with Lifeline for so long, I felt that I was a shy person when I went out in this field and but I realised I had to be, if I wanted to do it and show people in the region that I wanted to do it, that you had to lead from the front.

And all of a sudden there becomes other people who want to go with you, and be leaders. And I think a network leaders in your local community is the answer.

Nina O'Brien [05:27:25]:

Thanks, Oli, I'll cross to you in terms of some of your mechanisms in how you actually engage diverse voices that you've found successful?

Oli Le Lievre [05:27:3]

You know, I think I'm probably just touching on what you guys have covered as well.

I think probably the other thing is like normalising that it's okay to opt out from volunteering as well. And I think like I found that in community roles or not for profit boards, like it's quite a commitment on top of your day jobs. And I actually think we can all play a role in kind of normalising that and going, actually, you know what, put your hand up and say you actually don't have capacity and that's totally fine.

And I think finding those avenues where if someone has 2 hours that they can contribute today, then let's utilise that and make the most of it. And I think from a private sector piece, I think there is lots of opportunities. And there's a mate of mine in Melbourne who is trying to come up with app that looks at how do you build communities, similar to Strava and the way that people will share what they're doing from a fitness and exercise perspective but through a company lens.

And so how you've got as a business, if you've got 2 or 3 or 4 volunteering days, how do you actually provide that? So businesses and communities can say, well, actually we need someone for one day, 2 days, we need a graphic designer to help our community group and actually come up with new ways to help people with the things that they actually need. I think, yeah, I think it's really exciting to see what the digital side can do.

But I also think probably optimal, is allowing people to say, you know what, I just don't have capacity to do it.

Nina O'Brien [05:28:53]

Yeah, there certainly is value in stepping aside sometimes and creating a space for others to step in and encouraging others with quieter voices to step into that space. But yeah, that sounds really interesting that that app in terms of an, and I think the face of volunteering is certainly changing across Australia and where once upon a time we might have, you know, turned up to a monthly meeting, you know, year in, year out, we're no longer really prepared to do that.

So the onus is on the not for profit organisations themselves to be much more agile in the way that they understand how to engage people with commitments from either within their community or external to their communities as well.

Natasha Johnston [05:29:29]:

Can I just elaborate on that too? I agree that I think, having clear job descriptions for the roles that you're trying to fill within your organisation, so that volunteers know what it is that they're actually signing up to, and focusing on their strengths, not trying to get them to do something that they're not strong at or don't like.

So finding what their strengths are, what they love doing, focusing on that as I think I think is a good key.

Nina O'Brien [05:29:53]:

Yeah. Thank you. We will go to the final question around mental health. It's a really critical aspect and we've touched on, certainly in our discussion today that mental health and wellbeing are important, but sensitive topics as regions move into drought conditions and ongoing preventative support is really important.

Certainly, we've seen a really, a whole host of really interesting and innovative grassroots, community-based models for mental emerging in the drought preparedness space, which is really exciting. So across to you as panel members, what can we do from a community perspective to support our friends and neighbours before we see drought impact their mental health? And I might start right down the end with you Ross, if that's okay.

Ross Blanch [05:30:36]:

Yeah, one of the things I think could be, probably done better, is our city-based friends. So, they mean well, but they don't understand how things on farms, but if the media could just engage the city more with country people and acknowledge that they're really struggling on farms so that they, so it's really a bit more out there and yeah, we can do more. I know we can do more, but I think the city people just don't get it.

Oli Le Lievre [05:31:18]:

Can I jump in on that one? Because like, I would say, I probably tend to disagree. The way the media works is they fuel off revenue from advertising, from clickbait articles. They want fear and hatred to come out of it. And I think for us as an industry, and it really is at the heart of why I establishment Humans of Agriculture, because we can't rely on someone else to control our narrative.

And I think it comes back to within sort of our sector, if we want to portray agriculture for what it truly is, terms of, yes, there are challenges and there's adversities and things that we do face day-to-day. But there's also optimism and passion and there's the amazing sense of community in what we have in our regions, but also as a as an industry as a whole.

And I think, for us, if we want to shift that narrative, we actually can take control of that. And it's never more accessible now with social media. Organically, or you can actually pay now to get those impressions and get that influence. I think it's on us to kind of control, and I think that actually helps lift everyone up as well.

Sarah Parker [05:32:19]:

Can I just comment on a practical aspect of that? So I spent 3 years virtually, not seeing family and friends. So I'm a Queenslander that lives in Victoria. And we have friends that work for a company called BDO and they encourage their staff to spend time out in the industry, on farms. And one particular, you know, person that I know that works in that company takes his kids on holidays for 4 weeks a year in the caravan to 4 different farms.

Some are clients, some are just farms that they ring and say, can we visit you? And they did that during lockdown, dodging some of the, you know, lockdown periods, quick in and out. But they spent

time on farms with people that had not seen anyone for maybe a year or 2 because of restrictions in place. And they came and visited us for a week.

And that week was probably that time when we'd been 2 and a half years in and we were struggling. But just having someone there, but they did know how to milk a cow. They dodged all the cow pats in the dairy yard, but they actually just jumped in and said, look, we'll do all the cooking, we'll do the washing up and talk to you.

So maybe it's about getting some of these big corporates involved and in part of their PD, for staff that deal with the accounts of farms or agricultural businesses, to get out and get on the ground because they've also then developed a skill set of being able to talk to farmers, engage with them and hold a relationship that can benefit both parties during the tough times.

Nina O'Brien [05:33:48]:

Natasha?

Natasha Johnston [05:33:49]

Yeah, I think we need to give our people more tools. Tools in their belts to deal with anxiety, depression, mindfulness, I think is a really good tool that we could, you know, start running some more programs in rural communities, helping people with understanding anxiety and PTSD. We're seeing a lot of what our farmers are talking to us about now is like a form of PTSD, with this talk of the drought coming back and things drying off so quickly.

They are all so afraid and living in fear of what's next, what's going to happen, how am I going to pay my bills? So I think we've really got to get some tools out there for people to help with their mindsets.

Raelene Ward [05:34:33]

Can I just add to that to say, you know, First Nations people, when we think about suicide, we have the highest rates of suicide in this country.

We have the highest rates globally, you know, in other Indigenous countries, and I think when we talk about mental health and health and wellbeing, we need to understand the language that we use in different contexts. You know, drought does affect whole of communities, but it also affects Indigenous communities. We need to think about how, do we ensure communities are liveable, to make sure that, you know, First Nations people, particularly, remain in those rural communities because they're often the ones that are left behind.

[Recording ends]

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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