

PROJECT UPDATE

ALEKARENGE WORK EXPERIENCE PILOT PROJECT

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About the Work Experience Pathway Project and the Aboriginal Land Economic Development Agency (ALEDA)

In association with the Central and Northern Land Councils, Centrefarm Aboriginal Horticulture are currently establishing ALEDA to implement and coordinate multi-industry Aboriginal-owned developments throughout the Northern Territory. ALEDA aims to facilitate economic independence by supporting and assisting Traditional Owners to develop commercial opportunities.

ALEDA's pilot phase includes six commercial horticultural operations and two Work Experience Pathway Projects (WEPPs), providing a real-life opportunity to trial the commercial and social aspects of the strategy, while addressing nutrition, food security, economic participation, local decision-making, education and training.

The Alekarenge WEPP, established by Alekarenge Horticulture Pty Ltd (AHPL) and Centrefarm in 2020, embraces 3 cohorts of trainees: 1) middle school students; 2) senior school students; and 3) adult community members. The 130ha facility is designed to provide on-the-job training in: horticultural plot development; fencing, irrigation and plot management; plant propagation and establishment; and marketing and transportation.

The WEPP is part of a long-term plan to develop viable and sustainable primary industry on the Aboriginal estate to support the emergence of a commercial base, providing employment for local people on their own terms, and enabling the flow-on commercial and social benefits to the whole community.

The 2022 summer floods damaged transport networks across Australia, resulting in a several week food shortage in the Northern Territory. The event has highlighted the lack of resilience in remote food systems and proven the benefits of locally grown produce in improving food security.

Cohort 3

The first quarter of 2022 has seen the realisation of a goal over a year in the making, with the planting of our first large scale garlic crop. After the second successful trial was harvested in October 2021, the Cohort 3 crew has worked in consultation with Australian Garlic Producers to prepare a 5 hectare planting, completed at the end of March. This involved weeks of ground preparation, clearing, tilling, levelling and fertilising the field ready for farming.



Cohort 3 establishing the irrigation mains from the bore (left) and preparing the 5ha garlic plot (right)

The greatest achievement in preparation for planting was the implementation of an irrigation design. The irrigation system was commissioned last year to supply water to a potential 10 hectare plot, which is to include garlic, pumpkins and 300 mango trees, to be planted this coming quarter in partnership with the Northern Territory Department of Industry. The infrastructure will support the 10 hectare horticultural plot long into the future.



Cohort 3 setting up the irrigation system from the plans designed with NetaFim

Through the hot dry weather of February and early March, Cohort 3, joined by a number of local temporary workers, built the headworks at the new bore, trenched and lay over 600m of mainline and built and installed 17 risers to the valves which, through 4.5 km of submain, are now feeding the 300 sprinklers spread over the garlic crop. The planting, completed over 3 days with staff from Australian Garlic, began with a community celebration. Respected elders joined AHPL directors, Cohorts 1 and 2, and a number of community members to sing the land and welcome the project.



Cohort 3 preparing (left) and laying irrigation lines (middle). A leaflet produced to hire more casual workers from community (right)



The Sha garlic plot showing an excellent germination and growth rate one month after planting

2022 has also seen women from the community begin work with trainees and develop their own bush tucker garden. We now have two more community members working with Cohorts 1 and 2, Rosieanne Holmes and Tisha Corbett, who share their cultural knowledge with the trainees whilst assisting with daily duties at the farm.

A number of other women from the community were involved in a bush trip to collect bush tucker seeds, which happened in March led by farm assistant and AHPL Director Sabrina Kelly. The women were pleased to find some bush tomato, bush tobacco and bush bananas growing which they collected and brought back to the farm. The seeds of these plants are now growing at the farm shade house, after being planted by Cohort 1 and 2 trainees under the Cohort 3 women's supervision, and are being monitored by the women for progress. Once they are ready, the women plan to plant these bush tucker seeds in a garden on the farm. This garden will include a covered area where women can sit with the younger people to pass on knowledge about the bush tucker being grown.



The women's trip to collect bush food and medicine seeds to be planted back at the training centre.

Cohort 2

Cohort 2 trainees returned to the WEPP on the back of great success at the end of the 2021 school year, with 7 trainees achieving Certificate 1 in Agrifoods and 4 others receiving Statements of Attainment for the units of the Certificate that they completed, as well as other qualifications gained including first aid and white cards for civil construction work.



Graduation ceremony with trainees from Cohort 2

The trainees are currently focussed on preparing the market garden. So far they have been digging garden beds and walkways, preparing a compost soil layer and selecting seeds to grow based on what grew well last year, as well as a few new 'experiment' crops.

They have also been attending to other tasks around the farm, including tending to the citrus garden and picking watermelons on the main farm that were remaining from last year's crop. Trainees have also been able to continue developing their cooking skills, making food and treats in the kitchen including a delicious watermelon sorbet which they shared with younger students at Alekarenge School.

Cohort 2 have been studying for their VET certificates in Term 2. New trainees will work towards getting their Certificate I in Agrifoods, while those who achieved this Certificate last year will move on to working towards a Certificate II in Rural Operations. All trainees will be required to create and maintain their own individual garden plots, and eligible trainees will have the opportunity to make trips to the Juno Centre in Tennant Creek for training in other aspects of rural operations.



The trainees planting seeds in the greenhouse (left), making fresh watermelon sorbet (middle), and preparing garden plots (right)

Cohort 1

Cohort 1 students were based at the farm in Term 1 due to delay in recruiting a middle school teacher at Alekareng School, resulting in the middle school (Cohort 1) and senior school (cohort 2) classes being joined together for that period. Staff and students alike worked hard to keep both programs running smoothly alongside each other.

In Term 1, Cohort 1 assisted Cohort 2 trainees with their activities at the farm, as well as planting seeds in their greenhouse at the school. Several of the vegetables, including spinach, bok choy and rocket, are now ready to be harvested by the trainees and sold at their weekly roving farmers market which occurs throughout the community via the school bus. While waiting for their greenhouse crops to grow, trainees have sold eggs hatched by the farm's chickens which are cared for by Cohort 2.

With the 7/8/9 class teacher position having been filled, Cohort 1 trainees returned to Alekareng school for Term 2. They have continued their engagement with the WEPP via the greenhouse and roving farmers market and are working on plans to expand the greenhouse area into a green space that can be enjoyed by the whole school community.



Trainees at the Work Experience Pathway Project gardens (left) and planting seedlings in the greenhouse (right)