

PROJECT UPDATE ALEKARENGE WORK EXPERIENCE PILOT PROJECT August 2023 Issue #9

The Alekarenge Work Experience Pathway Project (WEPP), established by Alekarenge Horticulture Pty Ltd (AHPL) and Centrefarm in 2020, embraces middle school students, senior school students, and adult community members in on-the-job horticultural training and employment activities.

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.

Since our January newsletter the WEPP crew have been exceptionally busy, working well to achieve daily and long term goals. Continual on-the-job training and work activities has allowed for significant personal growth and ongoing involvement in various areas of daily farming routines, programming and equipment usage.

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 is planned to include six commercial horticultural operations and associated 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.



Planting the 2023 garlic crop

A recent visit by Senator Malarndirri McCarthy allowed the women to showcase their work within the Mango orchard, and for all staff to showcase the work undertaken with the Garlic crop. The staff led the discussion as to the work they had been involved in and the skills they were developing. Staff identified that having this opportunity led them to feel proud of their accomplishments on the farm.



Senator Malarndirri McCarthy with the WEPP women

Garlic update



Sabrina Kelly, Gabrielle Beasley and Tisha Corbett getting ready to plant garlic in the NT (photo ABC news)

After the successful large scale garlic trial in 2022 with Australian Garlic Producers, a 4-hectare crop has been planted this season.

The beginning of 2023 saw both men and women from the WEPP working to prepare the new ground for the garlic planting. This included weeks of slashing, hand clearing weeds, tilling, levelling and fertilising the field for the plant.

Weather conditions meant some of this preparation work was done after hours and many of the team decided to take up the additional work to ensure the crop was a success. This was a great reflection of the enthusiasm and commitment of the local workforce.



The garlic crop thriving



WEPP workers preparing the land for the 2023 garlic crop

Work continues in the garlic crop, with both men and women working daily to eradicate any weeds and assist with irrigation. Utilisation of machinery from the watermelon farm has allowed staff to weed larger clumps quickly and efficiently. Staff from Australian Garlic Producers regularly visit the crop and have been impressed with the crop lines. They anticipate a bumper crop of high quality Australian Garlic this September.

The September garlic harvest is unique in Australia, as most other Australian garlic is ready to harvest in November. This not only results in a better price for the crop but also increases Australia's national garlic growing window, reducing the need for international imports. All members of the WEPP involved in the garlic process have been extremely proud to be part of this achievement.

Infrastructure update

A significant achievement has been the successful construction of a 100m² climate controlled greenhouse at the WEPP facility. The AHPL workforce laid the concrete foundation, erected the framework, installed the climate control unit and fitted the internal structures of the greenhouse. The greenhouse will be used to grow seedlings to support the WEPP's semi-commercial activities. It is also planned to grow commercial seedlings to sell to nearby horticultural developments.



The WEPP workforce constructing the 100m² climate controlled greenhouse

A new production bore has been drilled and equipped with a pump and solar array at the facility. The production bore will allow the training farm to increase its horticultural activities, act as a backup if the primary irrigation bore fails, and ultimately increase employment and training opportunities in the community.

The WEPP workforce 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.

At the start of the year, the men also constructed a roof over the top of one of the WEPPs demountable accommodation units, resulting in greater energy efficiency and increasing the usable deck area.



The newly installed production bore and solar array

Mango update



The first prune of the mango trees

The 300-tree mango orchard planted last year has been thriving. The men have been pruning the crops to ensure the best growth, while daily management of the mangoes has been overseen by the WEPP women.

Weeding, maintaining regular fertilising processes, and managing the irrigation have been taught by managing staff and the women now work independently in the field. Regular routines are in place and the women have been confidently offering feedback and suggestions to the managing staff.



The women's daily management of the orchard

The Plant Industry team from the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade visited the farm and commented on how well the mangoes were doing and offered suggestions for further improving growth and future yields. This was later discussed and demonstrated so that all the women can continue to work independently on the suggested tasks.

Additional achievements

A veggie garden has been developed and maintained by the women, the patch is used to grow fresh vegetables to cook with and as a trial site for new varieties of crops. New signs have been painted and erected for the various crops. Developing the skills of seed propagation, repotting and thinning out of seedlings is done in the shade house as part of this process for future planting in the veggie garden. Ongoing discussion as to what's working, and what requires further research, is discussed at weekly debrief meetings with the women's group.



The men conducting early burning activities around the facility to ensure the fuel load is maintained before the fire season



The women working in their veggie patch



The WEPP open week with casual workers experiencing the job

In May Farm Manager, Jason Muller, and three of the staff, Randall Rice, Simeon James and Lance Brown had the amazing opportunity to head north to Darwin to join Centrefarm's Joe Clarke and Vin Lange to present at the 2023 Northern Australia Foods Future Conference. The staff presented at the conference, allowing them to explain what is being done in Ali Curung, and their involvement and experience from the project.

They also had an opportunity to explore many exhibits and displays of new agricultural resources and attended workshops, while meeting experts from industry, research, government and the private sector.

Co-mapping on Country & Governance training

In June the WEPP hosted workshops with AHPL directors and staff to explore governance and two-way governance with AHPL directors. They facilitated a current situational analysis of AHPL and a review of its vision to inform strategic decision-making for future horticultural development. This is essential for development, management and planning.

Centrefarm also facilitated the Co-mapping on Country of the Iliyarne Aboriginal Land Trust. Iliyarne is 30km north east of Alekarenge and is set to host one of ALEDA's flagship horticultural developments. Many of the Traditional Owners and community members involved in the WEPP will also be involved in this project. The workshops involved painting a large canvas map of country that brings together cultural knowledge, stories, sites, food, hunting areas, flora, fauna, and language. The maps, that Centrefarm have now co-created in Mataranka, Alekarenge and Iliyarne are a platform to facilitate communication and decision-making, and are foundational to all ALEDA projects.



Kim Mahood facilitating the Co-mapping workshop

Recently the WEPP hosted an open week to offer opportunities for adult community members to work at the farm on a casual basis, providing the possibility of future full-time employment. The open week successfully allowed potential staff to gain onsite hands-on experience of what daily farm work may entail. Approximately twenty men and women joined the WEPP employees during this period, and several of them continued to take up employment on a regular basis. Many other community members have since approached the farm managers to inquire about future working opportunities, providing encouraging support to the training centre and its future potential in the community.



Joe Clarke, Randall Rice, Simeon James and Lance Brown at the 2023 Northern Australia Foods Future Conference



AHPL directors and staff governance training