Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation

COURSE 23
FINAL REPORT

BY

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Introduction

I am a mother of two and grandmother of 4, and have come from a rural background growing up helping my Poppy on a farm – sheep and potatoes in a small town called Ballan. I am the eldest of 5 children and considered the most restless and have never been keen to settle in one place for too long. I love a challenge and not afraid of change – I have a firm belief that if you want something you can achieve anything and that life is short so there is no point in taking life too seriously so everything from work to daily life should be enjoyable, not always happy, but should be meaningful and lived in the moment.

While I have a restless streak, and love to travel my work life has been fairly stable for the last 28 years, working for a Japanese owned seafood company for over 18 years, then with Australian Prawn Farmers Association (APFA) for over 10.

For many years I have wanted to undertake the prestigious ARLP course and can't thank my sponsor, the FRDC, enough to have faith in my ability as a leader and to offer me the opportunity to take part.

Since taking part in ARLP my confidence in my leadership ability has risen as did my desire to take on more challenging roles within the aquatic regional sector. I was recently appointed the Aquatic Biosecurity Liaison Officer, Northern Australia so I am looking forward to a new role, where I write my own work plan, use my networking and leadership skills to make a difference in the biosecurity emergency preparedness and response against pests and disease incursions for over half of Australia. I will be shortly moving to Cairns region ready to tackle the new challenges this role will present me with.

I also must thank the APFA for supporting me and allowing me to participate in the program.

Highlights of and lessons from the program

The whole course has been one big lesson and learning experience for me and most times it has been learning about me. At 57 I thought I knew who I was and that I had been through enough life experiences and that nothing could phase me or make me think that I could ever say I've had a life changing experience apart from a couple of marriages and divorces.

Then I did the Kimberley's. I don't like camping, I did all the necessary fitness training, then you get to meet 32 other strangers and very quickly you are thrown into challenging situations and teams and have to survive.

I learnt that I did survive, somehow managed to swim out of a cave at some ungodly hour of the night, I abseiled for the first time ever (still have a small scar on my knee to prove it), slept on rocks with just a sleeping bag, swam with fresh water crocodiles, met and engaged with the local indigenous people, got to appreciate what their land means to them, privileged to visit the birthing caves and hear how much the females support one another.

This was probably one of the most meaningful parts of the experience. Of my group the 3 ladies who visited the birthing caves all came out emotional wrecks. We all felt something, possibly linked back to our own families and situations and it took a little while for us to calm down. It gave me a greater understanding of indigenous family and culture attitudes.

Another first for me was sleeping out in the total wilderness by myself for one night. We all had to do this, we were 100 metres apart. I would never do that and thought that I would be really scared. It was amazing, a full moon, no noise, very little wind, no wild animals or snakes, not only did I survive I slept really well. To this day I believe the indigenous spirits protected us and made sure we had a good experience.

I also learnt that not just God can walk on water, trailers can float on a tarpaulin as well!!

Some of my biggest learning about myself during the first phase was that if I don't feel valued as a team member then I don't put in what I should. Also that it can be difficult to be heard above the louder ones, we can all contribute, not all suggestions work, collaboration can be challenging, challenges can present their own challenges in creating competition.

Melbourne was the next big learning curve for me. Media training and crisis management. Little did I know that in a weeks' time I was to be thrust into a national crisis – whit spot prawn disease. I did not properly surface until four months and was enmeshed with government and industry going through the crisis at the state control centre in Brisbane. At the end of the second session my personal effectiveness, thanks to my sponsor's investment in the ARLP, would get me and my industry through one of the worst national disease crisis and one of the longest response phase that Queensland biosecurity have dealt with.

White spot crisis put me in the spot light in many ways. It was extremely challenging, I got to use media training whether I liked it or not and managed to remain calm, in control and to communicate "lots" between industry and government. It was one of the most heartbreaking and emotional times I have been through. To watch your industry slowly being destroyed by an exotic disease is very difficult and cruel. For those at the coal face who lost their farms the situation was volatile, farms felt helpless and extremely angry and to this day some aspects remain so. I was fortunate enough to have a supportive president and board, received huge amounts of support from FRDC who quickly engaged experts to help the farms; and thanks to the networks and relationships I had created over the years I had shoulders to cry on or to talk to when I needed them, and I did need them from time to time.

I recently googled myself – Helen Jenkins white spot prawns and there is a phenomenal amount of media and quotes from me including a Bing page of pictures, so I guessed I passed the media challenge and made good use of the training.

I don't believe the white spot journey is over yet, it is talked about everywhere I go, from the lay person in the street to industry meetings, government personnel and is used as a case study depending on the message being portrayed.

I also enjoyed the personality profiling during the Melbourne trip and was pleasantly surprised that I exactly agreed with my Myers Briggs type.

ENTP described as *quick, ingenious, stimulating, alert and outspoken. Resourceful in solving new and challenging problems. Adept at generating conceptual possibilities and then analysing them strategically. Good at reading other people. Bored by routine, will seldom do the same thing the same way, apt to turn to one new interest after another.*

By undertaking ARLP was an excellent investment. How would have other leaders or personality profiles have handled an industry crisis such as white spot? Very difficult to know or predict until you are thrust into one.

Leadership Contributions – now and in the future

Since the Melbourne session and being thrust into the limelight with media exposure and dealing with a crisis, I have learnt not to get too bogged down in detail, to speak up and speak my mind, that I have influence and that my voice is heard. I have experienced tricky politics within industry and externally. Understanding the key stakeholders, knowing what the issues are and being able to direct solutions even if it's not what some want to hear.

Living through white spot (and it's not over yet) was very stressful; high stress levels gave me a low tolerance level for petty politics, so I often spoke my mind in brutal, direct and honest ways. During it all I managed to keep my sanity even though I lost work life balance.

The white spot incursion was one of the longest running responses recorded by Queensland biosecurity and I would not like to see other stakeholders go through anything similar. I have realised during all this that perhaps industry should have been better prepared and while Australian industries expect that our border biosecurity measures should keep out diseases and pests it is impossible to do so especially when international trade comes before protecting Australian industries.

During negotiations with Deputy Prime Ministers' department for a financial assistance package for the affected farms, I was tapped on the shoulder to apply for another position relative to biosecurity.

I applied and then was successful.

I agonised over leaving an industry that I had been with for over ten years versus taking on a new challenge and with it change. I decided that I needed change and that there is never a good time to leave any position, I had negotiated a substantial financial assistance package for industry ($20 million) and felt it was time for the prawn farmers to have a new set of eyes, new thinking to take on the challenge of getting industry back on its feet.

17th July 2017 I took on the role of Aquatic Biosecurity Liaison Officer, Northern Australia with Animal Health Australia. Whilst it is early days yet the vast expanse of this area covering Rockhampton in QLD to Exmouth in WA will be a challenging role to manage and strengthen Australia's emergency animal disease response arrangements. The challenge will be who to engage with, if it is aquatic farms trying to make them see that they need to have biosecurity measures in place and that biosecurity is a shared responsibility.

I know that my learnings from the ARLP have given me the courage and strength to take on new and bigger challenges in the aquatic area of expertise. Through ARLP I now have contacts throughout regional Australia that I know I can call on for advice and help and some of these will be within the area of my new role.

I have started to develop a stakeholder engagement plan; the task ahead is enormous and fortunately some resources exist and are already actively engaged with aquatic biosecurity surveys.

I aim over the next two-year period to engage with the various regional communities, indigenous sectors, industries, and government agencies to be more biosecure aware, some will have biosecurity plans and I want to have touched as many sectors as I can to ensure that they are prepared for an emergency.

If I was to offer any advice to the next person facing an industry crisis it would be - be kind to yourself, take breaks, make sure you have support to engage during a disease outbreak; people offer to help, which is wonderful, knowing how to use that can be beneficial and remove the burden of having so much to do during an outbreak, and make sure you establish good communication with affected and non-affected parties. It is just as terrifying for the non-affected parties to know what is going on so they can get on with business but with heightened biosecurity awareness and protocols in place.

Looking back on my Kimberley journal and my thoughts from the solitary night in the bush was – for me to be open to trusting people, not to assume and to think more laterally.

I believe I am applying learnings from the ARLP leadership journey and was able to apply these through the white spot crisis. I have a better understanding of myself and by taking on a new job I can continue working for the betterment of regional Australia. Now that I have responsibility for half of Australia and its aquatic industries being better prepared against pests and diseases I know my leadership journey is only just starting.