

New program supports change in guard on EP farms

Young farmers across the Eyre Peninsula are gaining new skills through a unique program aimed at creating networks and supporting leadership development.

In recent years there has been an influx of the next generation of young people moving back to take on the responsibility of running the family farm.

The region's largest farming systems groups, Eyre Peninsula Agricultural Research Foundation (EPARF) and Lower Eyre Agricultural Development Association (LEADA), recognised the need to provide support to young farmers in tackling the challenges of running a successful farm business.

Wharminda private farm consultant Linden Masters was contracted by EPARF and LEADA to develop a program that would engage young farmers and provide them with the skills they required to grow farming in the region.

"Networks that used to exist in the past to support young farmers have long gone, such as Rural Youth, so a new way of providing support needed to be found," he said.

"This was expressed by one of the participants who said, 'Through the loss of Rural Youth and the demise over many areas of groups like Apex and even Ag Bureaus, we have lost many of our pathways for leadership development'."

Linden works with many upper EP farming groups and has seen them in various stages of vitality.

"Young people were often thrown into leadership positions with little support," he said. "Communities function best when there is broad participation, giving people a place and purpose."

Two candidates for the program were nominated by regional community groups with which Linden had contact. Participants were followed up individually to ensure they were supported as part of the program.

The 18-month program started in 2013 and featured four sessions run at various venues across the region, including a retreat at Coodlie Park, near Port Kenny. Sessions focused on leadership development, personality styles, effective communication and how to run an effective committee. Drawing on farm community leaders from across the region to talk to their experiences was a powerful way of providing practical information and advice to participants.

Initially 16 participants from across the upper EP participated but grew to 40 young farmers who have been involved in the program in some way.

After the initial retreat, participants were able to choose the topics they wanted to learn more about, such as business management, succession planning and public speaking.

“Feedback has been very positive, not only on the training aspects but also the networking created,” Linden said. “One participant told us it was great to have a group establishing connections with young go-getters from other regions which they may not have otherwise shared ideas with.”

While the young farmers involved were interested in continuing the group, they agreed a facilitator would be needed to organise meetings, enabling participants to still be part of it while managing the daily pressures of farming.

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Linden Master with workshop participants at the succession planning workshop held in Cummins.