



Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation

TRAIL

Program report

TRAIL Emerging Leaders Program

April 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Lands where we meet, work and live. We recognise the enduring spiritual connection, and we honour the sacredness of the Land. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future and the deep-seated wisdom they hold. We solemnly remind ourselves that this Land has always been, and will always be, Aboriginal Land.



Executive summary

The TRAIL Emerging Leaders Program 18 brought together 29 emerging leaders from across rural, regional and remote Australia for an intensive week-long leadership development experience based in Canberra and Namadgi National Park.

This cohort arrived with leadership visions centred on strengthening rural voices in decision-making, building workforce capability in regional Australia, improving access to health and wellbeing services, and positioning climate adaptation as opportunity rather than threat.

The program's role was to deepen their self-awareness, broaden their perspectives, and develop the adaptive leadership capability to act on those and future goals with confidence.

The evidence suggests it did. The most consistent shift across the cohort was a move from self-doubt to self-trust. Participants who entered the program describing patterns of second-guessing themselves, minimising their contributions, and waiting to feel they had earned the right to lead left with a different orientation. They described building confidence through action rather than waiting for it to arrive, asking for help as a leadership capability rather than a weakness, and stepping back from control to create space for others.

Alongside this personal shift, participants demonstrated strong engagement with the program's leadership frameworks and a clear intent to apply them in practice. The behaviour change data shows consistent patterns of commitment to reflection, intentional communication, delegation, advocacy, and expanding beyond familiar environments.

93%
of participants would recommend
the program to others

4.9
Customer satisfaction score out of 5

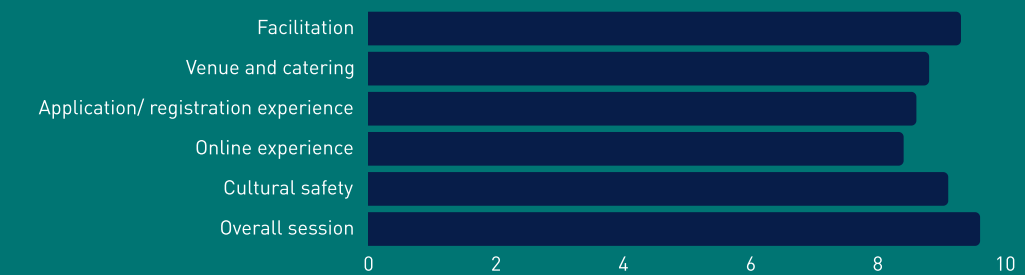
86%
approach leadership differently

93%
feel more confident to lead

96%
felt challenged but safe

96%
felt connection with the cohort

96%
have built valuable new connections



Program overview

Phase 1 – Understanding and advocating for rural, regional and remote Australia

The first phase of the program throws the participants in the leadership ‘deep end,’ requiring them to engage with each other and topics of significant interest across industries and rural, regional and remote Australia.

The participants began their journey in Canberra, starting with a Welcome to Country by Paul House outside the National Gallery, who also took the opportunity to share stories of his lifelong advocacy work and the ways he has influenced change.

This year’s program saw participants engage with established leaders from ARLF’s Agribusiness program. Agribusiness draws people from across all dimensions of the supply chain, allowing for a rich interaction between the groups and a shared exploration of some of the contextual forces shaping rural, regional and remote Australia.

The two cohorts gathered at Parliament House for an immersive advocacy session with leaders from four advocacy groups and government agencies:

- Suzi Tegen (National Rural Health Alliance)
- Su McCluskey (Special Representative for Australian Agriculture, DAFF)
- Margo Andrae (Australian Pork)
- David Shearer (Crawford Fund; International Fund for Agricultural Development)
- Troy Williams (National Farmers’ Federation)
- Tony Mahar (Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner)
- Ken Dachi (Welcoming Australia)
- Jack Knowles (Murray Darling Basin Authority)

Together, they explored the critical role advocacy plays in shaping policy and driving meaningful change. Participants also met with political staffers, gaining firsthand insights into government advocacy processes. These discussions prompted deep reflection on contemporary leadership amidst complex challenges and opportunities within their own sectors and communities, laying a solid foundation for advocacy. Finally, the groups got to meet and ask questions of two Federal Government Members of Parliament – Kristy McBain (Minister for Emergency Management and Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Territories) and David Smith (Government Whip).

Phase 2 - Immersive leadership experience

The challenge-based outdoor phase of the program is set within the stunning Namadgi National Park, inviting participants into a series of outdoor challenges which included bushwalking, navigation and problem-solving initiatives.

The focus in this phase is on deepening awareness, showing up authentically, building relationships and adapting to challenges as they arise. Many of the participants later expressed gratitude for having time away from the distraction of their mobile phones and the opportunity to establish deep and lasting connections with other leaders facing similar challenges to their own.

As participants move through the bush, they engage in thought-provoking discussions, reflecting on their behaviours, mindsets and values. These activities encouraged them to explore alternative perspectives on leadership, expanding their understanding of how others navigate complexity. While walking, participants discuss the challenges they are facing in their sectors, preparing ground for further advocacy and strategic leadership work that happens in the third phase.

Phase 3 - Preparing for leadership and action

The final stage of the program invites participants to integrate the lessons of the week and prepare for how they will lead when they get back to their families, organisations, industries and communities.

A highlight was a session with ARLF Fellow Adrienne Francis (ABC journalist) and Mark Dando from Rabbit and Lion, who led a series of practical workshops on crafting and delivering messages effectively. Participants learned how to communicate with impact across diverse audiences and media platforms, equipping them with the skills to engage stakeholders with confidence.

As the program drew to a close, participants gathered around the fire for an evening with Melissa Fletcher, CEO of Fletcher International and Chair of the ARLF. Melissa shared her personal leadership journey, the challenges she has faced and how she has created meaningful impact throughout her career.

The experience concluded with participants developing and sharing personal leadership action plans, affirming their commitment to continued growth and their future leadership impact within their industries, communities and beyond. This year’s graduation speaker was Dallas Pearce of AgriFutures, also a TRAIL alumnus. Dallas shared grounded wisdom on how to integrate the learning when returning to work and life.

Phase 4 - Embedding growth and fostering connections

ARLF offers two online group coaching sessions at six and twelve weeks after the program. These two connection points help participants integrate the learning into their lives, organisations and industries. TRAIL participants can also access the ARLF Learning Hub, including webinars, articles and further development opportunities like mentoring and more advanced leadership development programs.



TRAIL participants consistently bring openness and a strong appetite for learning, and this year's cohort was exceptional. From the outset, they demonstrated a deep commitment to the journey, fully engaging with both the process and their peers. Their sophistication of thinking, adaptability and willingness to stretch themselves gives me great confidence in the strength of future leadership across rural, regional and remote Australia.

Simone Carroll-Germech, TRAIL Program Manager and facilitator

Cohort at a glance

The twenty-nine emerging participants of this cohort were predominantly women with 65.5% and 34.5% men, slightly above the average distribution of ARLF's programs. cross more industries than others.

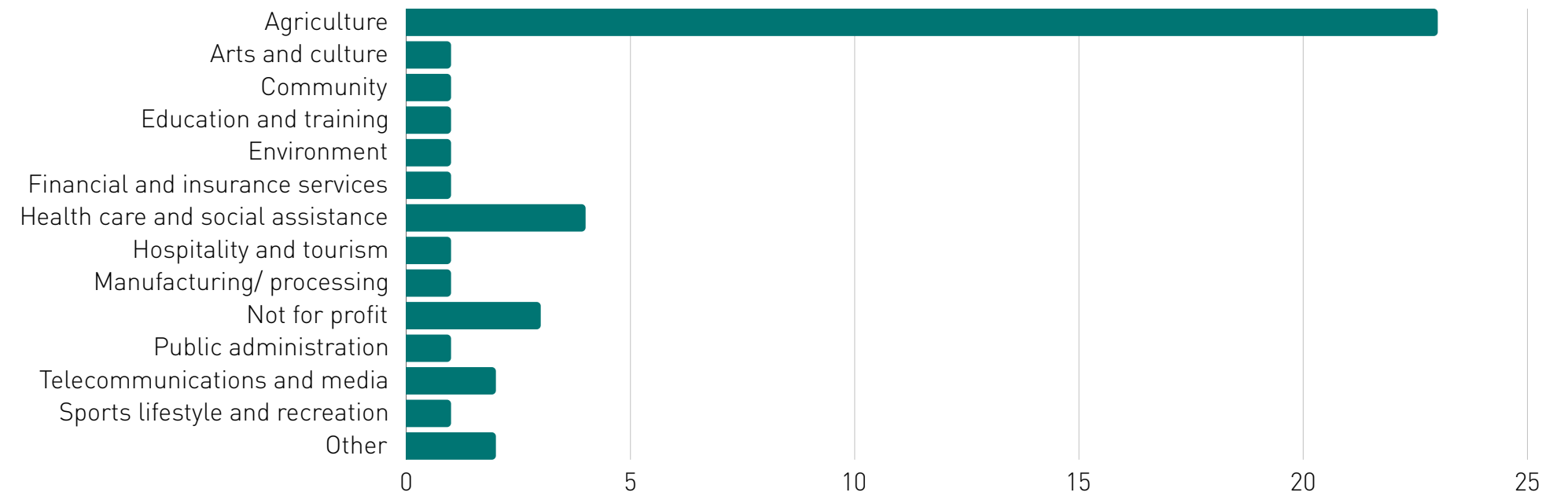
New South Wales contributed the largest share of participants (37.9%), followed by Western Australia (24.1%) and Queensland (17.2%). South Australia, Victoria and the ACT made up the remainder. This cohort did not have any participants from the Northern Territory or Tasmania, both states being generally lower in participation across our core programs.

No participants identified as First Nations in this cohort and two participants were born outside of Australia.

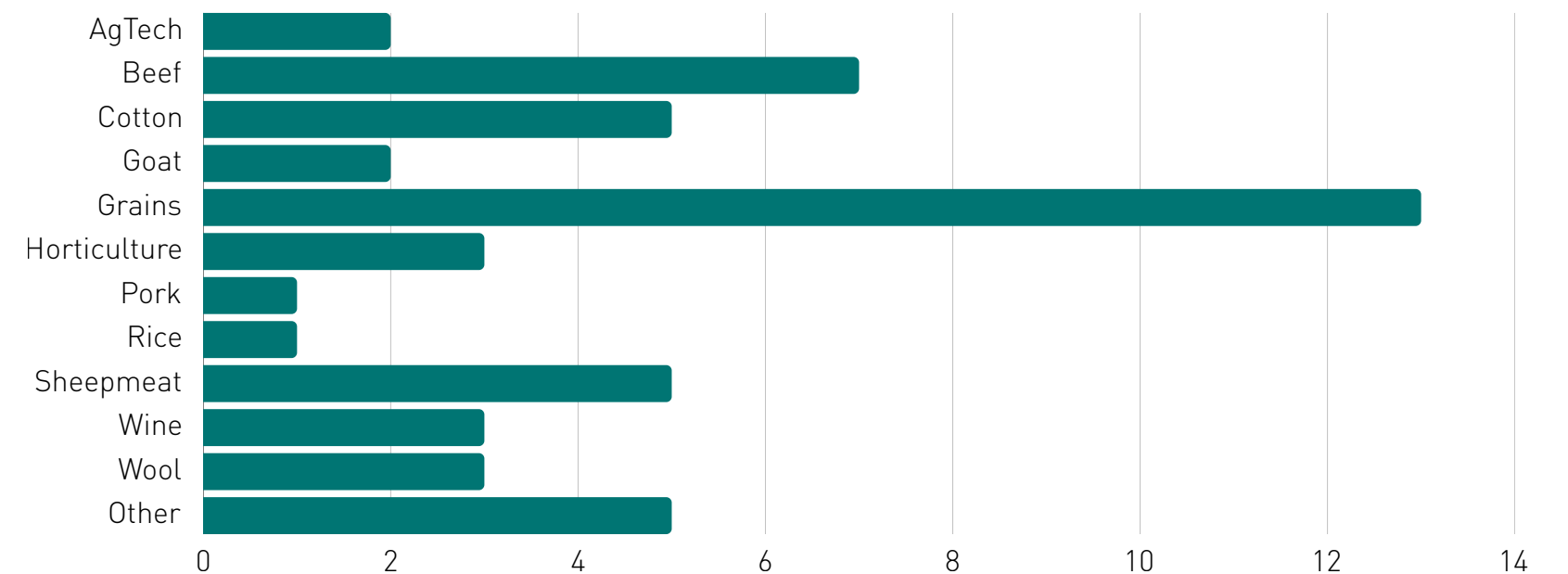
The majority of participants held a bachelor degree (55.2%) or postgraduate qualification (13.8%), with the remainder holding certificates, diplomas or secondary education. This educational profile, combined with the seniority of roles represented, suggests a cohort with existing professional foundations who are at a pivotal point in their leadership trajectory rather than at the very beginning of their careers.

The industry background of participants in this cohort was predominantly agricultural, with grains, beef, cotton and sheepmeat the most represented sub-industries. This reflects the program's funding partnerships with agriculture industry organisations, whose investment directly enabled participation from across their respective sectors. Health care and social assistance was the next most represented industry outside agriculture, with participants working in mental health, allied health and community services in regional settings. It's important to note that participants are often involved in several industries and some are active across more industries than others.

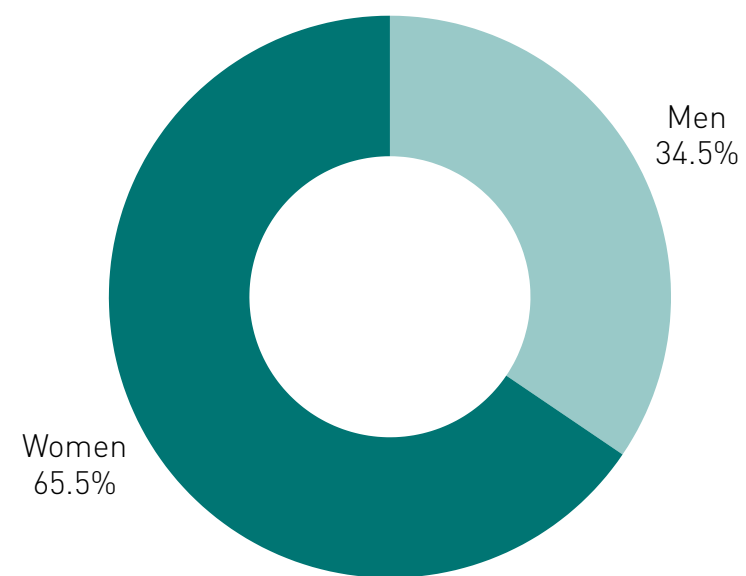
Participants by industry



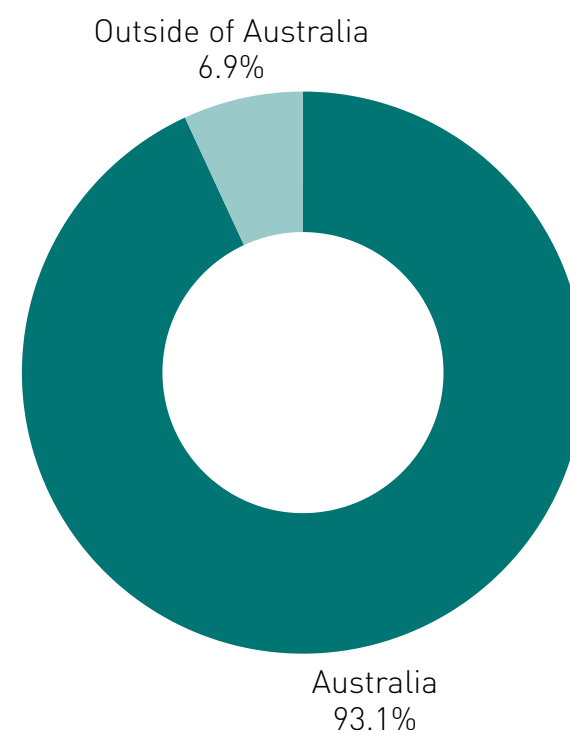
Participants by agriculture sub-industry



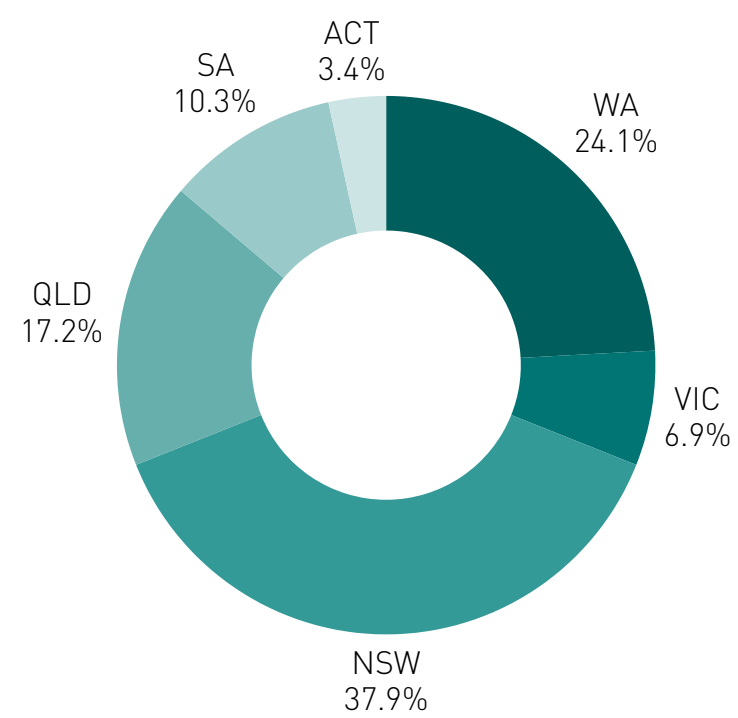
Gender split



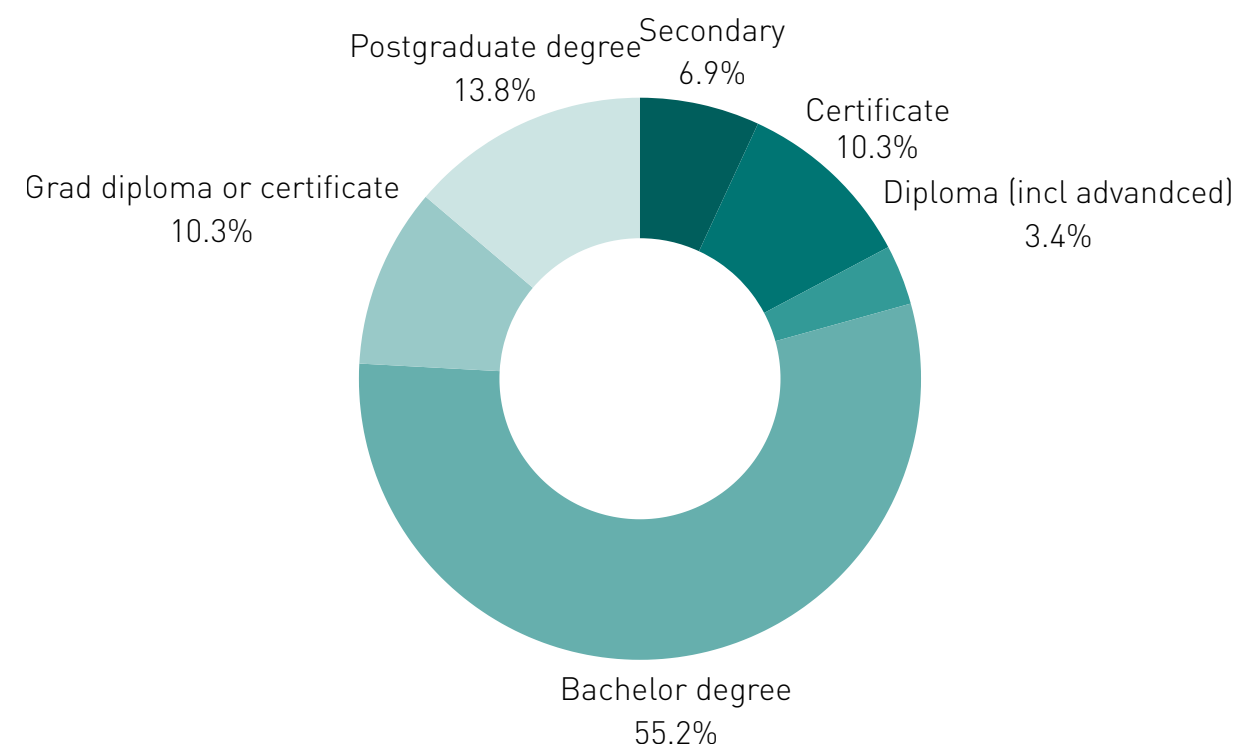
Country of birth



Participants by state



Education



Participant experience and stories of change

Three themes emerged consistently from participant feedback, drawn from survey comments, behaviour change responses and testimonials. Each points to a shift in how participants understand themselves and their capacity to act.

From self-doubt to self-trust.

The most pervasive change across the cohort was a shift in how participants relate to their own capability. Before the program, many described patterns of second-guessing themselves, minimising their contributions, or waiting until they felt they had earned the right to lead. The program created conditions where they could test that assumption and find it wanting.

In their behaviour change responses, participants described committing to backing their own judgement rather than defaulting to hesitation, asking for help without guilt, and replacing negative self-talk with recognition of their own strengths. One participant wrote that they had discovered they were quite insecure in a group setting and had been making themselves smaller to fit in. They left refusing to do that any longer. Another described a shift from waiting for confidence before acting to building confidence through action. That this theme appeared as the dominant pattern across both the "start doing" and "stop doing" responses suggests that the program is reaching people who already have leadership capability but whose internal narrative has not yet caught up with their capacity. The program's contribution is not building capability from nothing but creating the conditions for participants to recognise and trust the capability they already hold.

Leading with intention rather than instinct.

A second consistent theme was the shift from reactive to deliberate leadership. Participants described learning to slow down, to step back and observe their team rather than defaulting to doing mode. The DISC analysis, Tuckman's stages of group development, and the People-Process-Product framework gave participants language and structure for patterns they had sensed but not named.

In their behaviour change responses, several committed to spending more time on process rather than rushing to outcomes, and to creating space for quieter voices rather than filling silence. One participant captured this shift precisely: they would rely less on outcome-driven urgency and instead create room for the team to contribute before reaching for solutions. Others noted specific plans to introduce DISC and storytelling frameworks into their workplaces, suggesting the program content is translating directly into practice intent.

The breadth of frameworks participants cited in their action commitments, from DISC to the three Ps to bridging techniques from the media training, reflects strong program engagement and signals that the curriculum is landing as practical and applicable rather than theoretical.

Connection as infrastructure.

The third theme was the quality and depth of connection built within the cohort. Rated 9.5 out of 10 for cohort connection and 9.6 for valuable new connections, these figures tell part of the story. The participant testimony tells the rest.

Multiple participants described the relationships formed during TRAIL as among the most genuine professional connections they have made. The absence of phones and technology during the outdoor phase was cited repeatedly as a catalyst. One participant noted that the connections built without distraction showed them how much their phone use was eroding presence in their everyday relationships, and committed to device-free time as a regular practice.

This matters because peer networks are where long-term impact often lives. The cohort did not simply get along. They built the kind of trust that allows vulnerability, challenge, and mutual accountability. Several participants made specific commitments to maintaining these connections through ongoing accountability, shared learning, and cross-sector collaboration. The conditions the program created, particularly the immersive outdoor phase without technology, appear to be a distinctive and difficult-to-replicate contributor to this depth of connection.



Behaviour change intentions

As part of the program's closing reflection, participants identify what they will start doing or do more of and what they will stop doing or do less of. These responses capture intent and aspiration for behaviour change, providing early indicators of the medium to longer-term shifts the program is designed to catalyse. Across the TRAIL 18 cohort, responses clustered around several consistent themes.

What participants intend to start doing

Reflection and intentional practice.

Participants consistently identified a commitment to slowing down, building regular reflection habits and journaling into their routines. Many noted the value of stepping back from day-to-day operational demands to observe patterns, assess group dynamics and respond with greater intentionality rather than reactivity. This theme connects directly to the program's emphasis on adaptive leadership, where the capacity to pause, observe and choose a response is a core practice rather than a luxury.

Seeking support and distributing leadership.

A strong theme emerged around asking for help earlier and without guilt. Participants recognised a tendency to default to self-reliance and identified delegation, shared ownership and trust in others' capability as areas for deliberate development. Several noted plans to involve team members earlier in decision-making and create more space for others to lead. This is notable because it represents a shift in how participants define leadership itself, from individual performance to enabling collective capacity.

Expanding beyond familiar environments.

Participants expressed clear intention to step beyond familiar settings, whether geographically, professionally or socially. This included travelling to events beyond their immediate region, actively maintaining and expanding networks, and seeking experiences that challenge established patterns. Several participants specifically noted the value of connecting with people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. For a cohort drawn from rural, regional and remote Australia, where geographic distance can narrow professional networks, this commitment to deliberate expansion is a meaningful outcome.

Applying program frameworks in practice.

Participants identified specific tools and concepts they plan to integrate into their workplaces and communities, including DISC behavioural analysis, the three Ps (People, Process, Product), Tuckman's stages of group development, panarchy and storytelling as a leadership practice. The breadth of frameworks cited reflects strong program engagement and practical applicability. Several participants described plans to introduce these frameworks to their teams, suggesting a multiplier effect beyond the individual participant.

Advocacy and voice.

Multiple participants identified a renewed commitment to advocating for their teams, industries and communities. This included speaking up on issues they had previously felt too hesitant to raise, using bridging techniques from media training in broader contexts, and actively working to connect rural and urban perspectives. This theme aligns directly with the cohort's leadership visions, where strengthening rural voice in decision-making was the most prominent aspiration.

Communication and presence.

Participants noted intentions to communicate with greater clarity and purpose, listen more actively, recognise others' contributions more deliberately and use storytelling to strengthen their influence and advocacy. The Rabbit and Lion media workshop was cited repeatedly as a catalyst for this shift, suggesting that practical, immediately applicable capability development landed particularly well alongside the more reflective elements.

What participants intend to stop doing or do less of

Self-doubt and internal criticism.

The most prominent theme across all responses was a commitment to reducing self-doubt, negative self-talk and the tendency to undervalue one's own voice and perspective. Participants described patterns of making themselves smaller, holding back in senior settings and waiting to feel they had earned the right to contribute. Many recognised that confidence develops through action rather than preceding it, and expressed a clear intention to back their own judgement rather than defaulting to hesitation. That this was the single strongest theme across both start and stop responses reinforces that the program's most significant contribution may be in shifting participants' relationship with their own capability.

Stepping back to let others lead.

Several participants identified a pattern of defaulting to control, whether by leading every meeting, taking on others' responsibilities or slipping into doing mode when collaboration would produce stronger outcomes. This included a recognition that stepping back is not a withdrawal from leadership but an active choice to create space for others to contribute and develop.

Overcommitting and poor boundaries.

Participants identified the need to stop saying yes to requests that stretch their capacity beyond what is sustainable. This extended beyond workload to include leaving work at work and being more intentional about protecting personal time and energy, reflecting a broader recognition that presence requires deliberate boundaries.

Behaviour change intentions con't

Rushing to solutions.

A recurring theme was the tendency to move too quickly toward outcomes at the expense of process and inclusion. Participants noted they would rely less on urgency-driven decision-making and instead create space for ideas to emerge from the team. Several identified a need to become more comfortable with silence and resist the impulse to fill gaps, recognising that pace and space are themselves leadership choices.

Reducing digital distraction.

Several participants noted the impact the program's immersive, device-limited environment had on the quality of their connections. This prompted commitments to reducing phone use, particularly scrolling and screen time around others, and protecting the kind of presence they experienced during the program. This is a direct example of the program's design influencing behaviour change beyond the formal curriculum.

Moving beyond familiar settings.

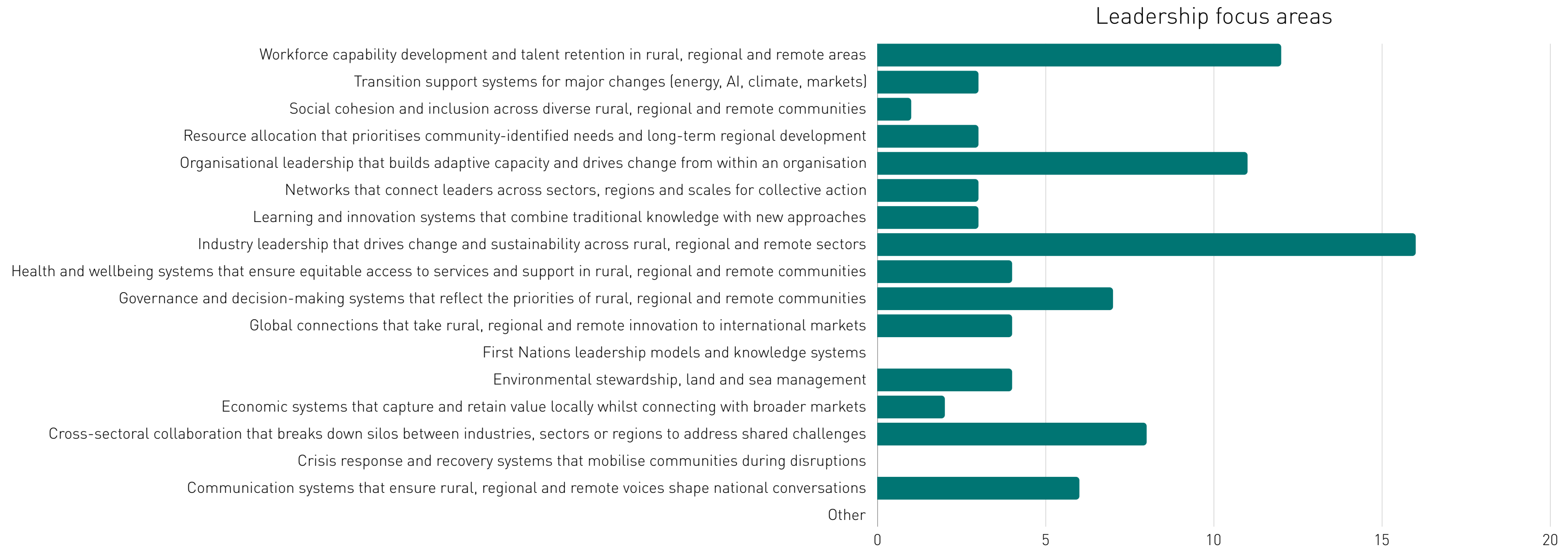
Participants identified patterns of staying within familiar settings, whether geographical, professional or social, and committed to actively disrupting those defaults. This mirrors the "start doing" commitment to expanding networks and seeking challenge, and suggests the shift is being articulated from both directions: stopping the pattern of comfort and starting the practice of deliberate stretch.

The data presented in this report captures the earliest stages of the program's impact. Using evaluation frameworks such as the KASA model (Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, Aspirations), the changes measured immediately after a program sit at the awareness, knowledge and aspiration levels. Participants are articulating what they now understand differently, what they intend to do, and how their attitudes toward their own leadership have shifted. These are necessary preconditions for behaviour change and longer term impact, not the behaviour change itself. The true test of the program's impact will emerge in the months and years that follow, as participants continue to learn and grow and translate intention into practice within their organisations, industries and communities.



Cohort leadership focus

We ask participants to identify the leadership focus areas most relevant to their work and aspirations. The chart below shows the distribution across the TRAIL 18 cohort. Industry leadership that drives change and sustainability was the most selected focus area, followed by workforce capability development, organisational leadership, and networks that connect leaders across sectors. Health and wellbeing, governance and decision-making, and cross-sectoral collaboration also featured prominently. This distribution tells us something about where this cohort's collective energy is directed. The concentration around industry leadership, workforce capability and cross-sectoral collaboration suggests a group oriented toward building systems and structures rather than responding to individual issues. Combined with the strong representation of agriculture and RDC-supported participants, it reflects a cohort positioned at the intersection of industry, community and policy.



Cohort leadership vision

At the start of the program, we asked participants to articulate their vision for positive change within their leadership focus area. These responses reveal a cohort that is already deeply embedded in the challenges and opportunities facing rural, regional and remote Australia, and that brings a clear sense of purpose to their leadership. Several themes emerged across the group.

Stronger rural voice in decision-making.

A significant number of participants described a disconnect between the people closest to the work and the systems that shape their operating environment. Their visions centred on ensuring rural and regional perspectives are actively reflected in policy, governance, and industry direction rather than shaped from a distance. Several spoke about creating clearer feedback channels and pathways for community leaders to influence decisions at a national level.

Workforce, careers and capability in regional Australia.

Participants identified workforce attraction, retention and development as a defining priority. Visions ranged from positioning agriculture as a preferred career choice for the next generation through to building systems that support early-career professionals in regional roles. A common thread was the desire to make regional careers visible, viable and valued rather than seen as a compromise.

Health, wellbeing and access to services.

Multiple participants focused on the gap between what rural communities need and what they can access, particularly in maternal health, mental health, and preventative care. Their visions emphasised locally led, culturally safe, and sustainable service models rather than fly-in solutions. Participants also connected health outcomes directly to community viability and retention.

Climate adaptation and environmental stewardship as opportunity.

Rather than framing environmental challenges as threats, several participants positioned climate adaptation and sustainable land management as opportunities for innovation, market differentiation, and closer connection between producers and consumers. Feedback also highlighted frustration with regulatory frameworks that do not scale to the realities of small rural businesses.

Community resilience through connection and collaboration.

Across many responses, participants described leadership as fundamentally relational. Their visions centred on building networks, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and creating the conditions for communities to lead their own development. The language was consistently about enabling existing capacity rather than importing solutions.



Cohort dynamics and connection

The TRAIL 18 cohort formed quickly and deeply. Facilitators and participants alike noted the cohort's willingness to be vulnerable with each other and to engage honestly with challenging material. The outdoor phase, with its removal of technology and shared physical challenge, accelerated a trust-building process that typically takes far longer in conventional professional settings.

The strength of the cohort's bond was evident in participant feedback. Across survey comments, behaviour change responses and testimonials, participants consistently described the connections formed during TRAIL as among the most genuine professional relationships they have made, and expressed clear intent to maintain and build on these networks beyond the program

Recommendations for future cohorts

The program design delivered what it intended. The sequencing from advocacy exposure to immersive outdoor challenge to practical communication capability and personal action planning created a coherent arc that participants could track in their own development. The Rabbit and Lion media workshop was a consistent highlight across survey comments, testimonials and behaviour change responses, suggesting that practical, immediately applicable capability development lands particularly well alongside the more reflective elements of the program.

A small number of participants offered observations that point to design refinements for future iterations, noting that these sit within the productive tension the program is designed to create and that navigating difference and discomfort is itself a core element of the adaptive leadership approach. Feedback indicated that integrating across groups was more difficult without shared experiences, with a suggestion that future iterations consider mixing participants to enable broader connection. Separately, feedback flagged that the age range within the cohort created some barriers to connection, and that clearer preparation for the physical demands of the outdoor phase would have helped some participants engage more fully. Additional downtime built into the outdoor phase to allow for processing and reflection was also suggested. None of these observations point to fundamental issues with the program design, but each offers a useful prompt for continued refinement.



Participant list

- Anne Millar, Agronomist, Elders, Beresford, WA – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Ashleigh Stielow, Agronomist, Delta Agribusiness, Coonamble, NSW – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Ashley Aldridge, Coordinator Community Development, Shire of Exmouth, Exmouth, WA – Self Funded
- Bec Dean, Agricultural Consultant, Rural Management Strategies Pty Limited, Wagga Wagga, NSW – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Beth Kerville, Social Worker and Mental Health Clinician, Royal Flying Doctor Service, Cobar, NSW – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry
- Brianna Meacle, Livestock Production Manager, Whyalla Beef, Clifton, QLD – Whyalla Beef Pty Ltd
- Caitlin Smith, Program Manager, AgriFutures, Kensington, NSW – AgriFutures
- Colin Moll, Corporate Services Manager, Riverland Funerals, Renmark West, SA – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry
- Darcy Warren, Senior Research Manager, Field Applied Research (FAR) Australia, Grovedale, VIC – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Grace Griffiths, Business Operations and Agronomy Manager, Data Ag / Griffiths Farming, Goondiwindi, QLD – Cotton Research & Development Corporation
- Haylee Murrell, Graduate Agronomist, Pursehouse Rural Gunnedah, Gunnedah, NSW – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Janelle Montgomery, CottonInfo Program Manager, CRDC, Moree, NSW – Cotton Research & Development Corporation
- Jemima Erskine, Relationship Analyst / Registered Midwife, Rabobank, Forest Reefs, NSW – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry
- Jerome O'Malley, Manager, CBH Group, Merredin, WA – CBH Group
- Jessica Watson, Occupational Therapist, Thrive Medical, Broken Hill, NSW – Matilda Ferguson Scholarship
- Josh Petty, Livestock Manager, NH Foods, Beebo, QLD – Whyalla Beef Pty Ltd
- Kate Witham, Project Consultant, Farmanco, York, WA – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Kelly Kornacki, Manager, Emerging Industries, AgriFutures Australia, The Rock, NSW – AgriFutures
- Kylie Scholz, Owner, Murray Bridge Tourist Park, Murray Bridge, SA – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry
- Lachie Biglin, Agronomist, Nutrien Ag Solutions, Kondinin, WA – Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Lauren Edwards, Grazier, Western Valley Agriculture, Kulwin, NSW – Matilda Ferguson Scholarship
- Noel Barker, Feedlot Manager, Yarranbrook Farms Pty Ltd (Mort & Co), Stanthorpe, QLD – Australian Lot Feeders Association
- Olivia Thorn, Journalist, Australian Broadcast Corporation, Kojonup, WA – AgriFutures
- Richard Doak, Manager, CBH Group, Mira Mar, WA – CBH Group
- Sayra Samudio, Sustainable Farming Practices Manager, Riverine Plains Inc, Yarrawonga, VIC – AgriFutures
- Stephanie Dickson, Senior Project Officer, Bureau of Meteorology, Ngunnawal, ACT – Bureau of Meteorology
- Tim Gogoll, Team Leader, Skylight Mental Health, Mount Barker, SA – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry
- William Croft, Supply Operations Manager, Syngenta, Camperdown, NSW – Syngenta
- Wim Linstrom, Node Manager, SQNNSW Innovation Hub, Stanthorpe, QLD – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry



Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere thanks to all our TRAIL partners. Without your support, TRAIL and our continued work and impact in regional, rural and remote Australia would not be possible. Future businesses, industries and communities will benefit greatly from this exceptional cohort of emerging leaders. We look forward to seeing the legacy these graduates will create through their collective leadership.

This year also reflects exciting growth and evolution across TRAIL. We were especially proud to have offered two Matilda Ferguson Scholarships, made possible through generous donations from across the community. These scholarships were established to honour a young woman's legacy and to open new pathways for emerging female leaders in rural and regional Australia. We are also delighted to share that a third scholarship has now been confirmed for the 2027 TRAIL cohort. These scholarships represent an important step in broadening access and opportunity across our program offerings and strengthening the diversity of leadership across our cohorts.

TRAIL 18 was delivered through the dedication of facilitators Simone Carroll-Germech and Benny Callaghan, the Outward Bound team, ARLF Fellow Adrienne Francis and Mark Dando of Rabbit and Lion, and the leaders and speakers who gave their time during the Canberra phase, including Paul House, Suzi Tegen, Su McCluskey, Margo Andrae, David Shearer, Troy Williams, Tony Mahar, Ken Dachi, Jack Knowles, Minister Kristy McBain and David Smith. ARLF Chair Melissa Fletcher and graduation speaker Dallas Pearce each brought personal leadership stories that grounded the program's final phase.

Thank you also to the ARLF team whose work behind the scenes made this program possible, from program design and logistics through to participant support, communications and evaluation. Their commitment to creating the conditions for leadership growth is evident in every dimension of the participant experience.

Most importantly, the program's impact reflects the courage and openness of the 29 participants who chose to show up fully.

TRAIL Emerging Leaders Program 2026 partners

- AgriFutures
- Australian Lot Feeders Association
- Bureau of Meteorology
- CBH Group
- Cotton Research & Development Corporation
- Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry
- Donors of the Matilda Ferguson Scholarship
- Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Syngenta
- Whyalla Beef Pty Ltd



Thank you to our partners



Australian Government
**Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry**



Testimonials



TRAIL is a phenomenal leadership program that brings together diverse individuals from throughout the agricultural industry all over Australia, it aims to create space for leadership growth and development whilst putting participants in a safe but uncomfortable space to enable this environment. It is amazing the strength of the connections developed between facilitators and participants in such a short time frame and the innate trust you have with this group of people to have your back throughout the program and leading into our lives beyond.

Brianna Meacle, Livestock Production Manager, Whyalla Beef, Clifton, QLD – Whyalla Beef Pty Ltd





Participating in the ARLF Trail Emerging Leaders Program in 2026 makes you dig deep, learn about your leadership mindset, the mindset of your peers and broader community and equips you with an understanding to advocate for what drives your passion in RRR. Stepping back into reality after the program, I was faced with a natural disaster in my region, which with what I had learnt the week prior helped me step up for my community in a time of great need. This program helps shape emerging leaders from all parts of rural regional and remote Australia providing a stronger future for these communities for now and in the future.

**Ashley Aldridge, Coordinator
Community Development, Shire of
Exmouth, Exmouth, WA – Self Funded**



The TRAIL program provided a level of challenge that genuinely pushed me outside of my comfort zone. While the program itself was short, it fostered meaningful connections and growth that will act as a catalyst for my ongoing development and a leader.

**Darcy Warren, Senior Research Manager,
Field Applied Research (FAR) Australia,
Grovedale, VIC – Grains Research and
Development Corporation**





The ARLF TRAIL program has been an incredibly valuable experience. It has helped me build confidence, strengthen my leadership and advocacy skills, and create meaningful connections across rural communities. The support and guidance from the mentors, along with the networking opportunities, have been both inspiring and empowering. This program has deepened my commitment to rural leadership and strengthened my confidence in creating positive change.

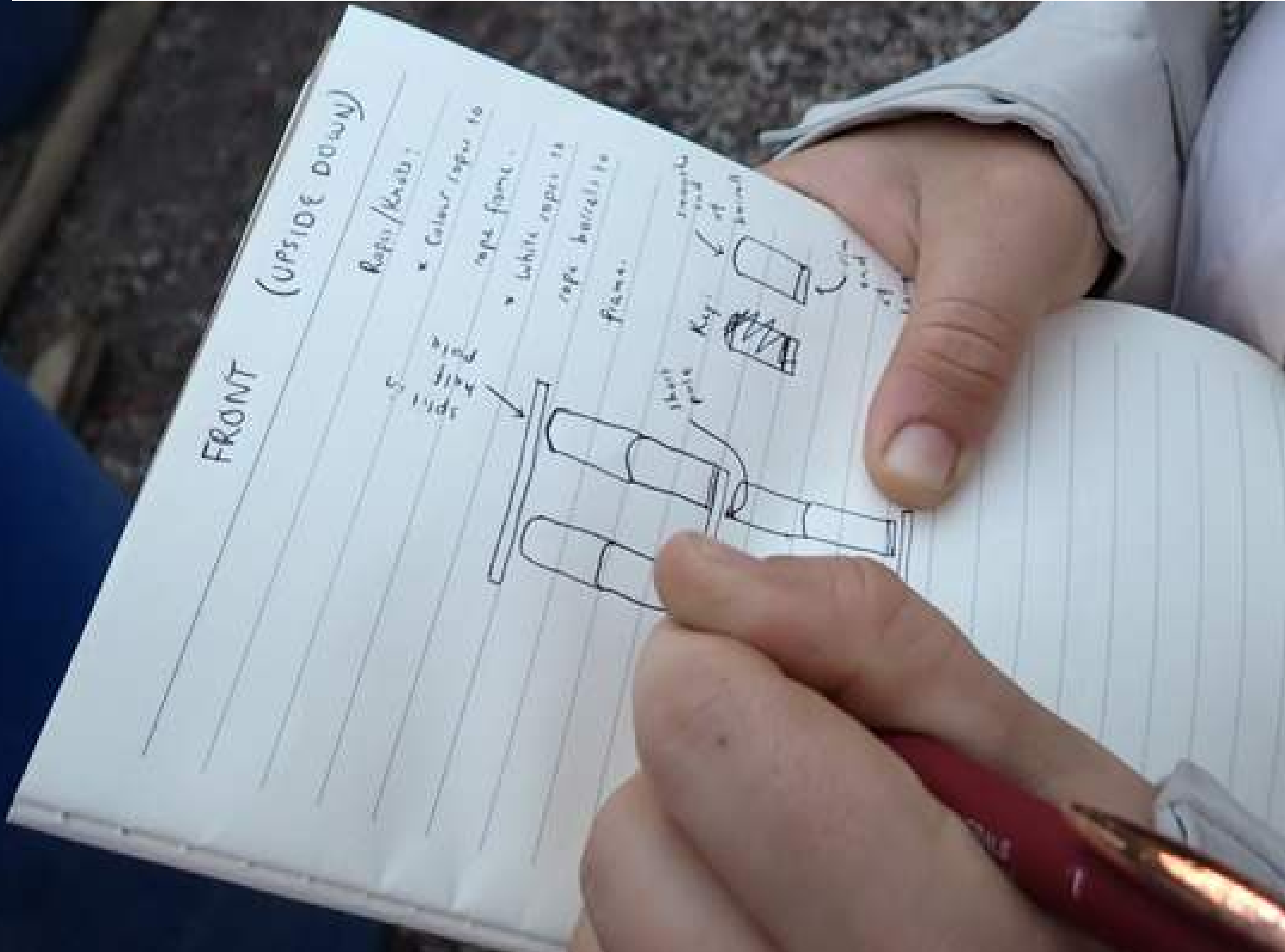
Beth Kerville, Social Worker and Mental Health Clinician, Royal Flying Doctor Service, Cobar, NSW – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry



TRAIL 18 was an incredible experience blending theory within the moment practice and feedback. Being with 29 other like-minded individuals seeking to develop their leadership allowed for strong connections to be built, and likely to last years into the future. The knowledge and sharing across the participants and regions they live and work in is so incredible. We could see the passion and love for their community, community members and industry. This TRAIL experience is an opportunity to get uncomfortable, practice and grow in real time whilst you're having a laugh and genuine fun times. Thank you ARLF for this program.

Tim Gogoll, Team Leader, Skylight Mental Health, Mount Barker, SA – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry





The ARLF TRAIL Emerging Leaders Program was a truly transformative experience. It deepened my self-awareness, strengthened my adaptability and gave me powerful aha moments that will shape how I lead. The combination of advocacy training, immersive bush challenges and genuine connection with other emerging leaders pushed me to grow while staying true to my values. I left feeling more intentional, more confident and better equipped to lead with clarity, inclusion and impact.

**Caitlin Smith, Program Manager,
AgriFutures, Kensington, NSW –
AgriFutures**



As an emerging leader, programs like this are few and far between and would have been impossible without the support of my funder, GRAINS RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION. The TRAIL program has been life changing so far, and I can't wait to see what else I discover about my leadership with the tools learnt. The TRAIL program has been an incredibly valuable, transformative, and catalytic experience, providing the opportunity to step back, reflect, and develop a deeper understanding of my leadership style. It has challenged me to think more intentionally about how I lead, while reinforcing the importance of deliberate development.

Ashleigh Stielow, Agronomist, Delta Agribusiness, Coonamble, NSW – Grains Research and Development Corporation





TRAIL was a truly life-changing experience for me. It gave me the space to better understand who I am as a leader, but also who I am as a person. Through the program, I learned more about my leadership profile and how to use that awareness to lead with greater intention, empathy and authenticity. It also helped me improve the way I connect and relate with the people I work with every day.

**Sayra Samudio, Sustainable Farming
Practices Manager, Riverine Plains Inc,
Yarrawonga, VIC – AgriFutures**



The TRAIL program has fundamentally shifted the way I view myself and others. It stretched my comfort zone in a safe and supported way, allowing me to elevate my existing leadership skills to a whole new level. I've made invaluable personal and professional connections and know how helpful these fresh skills and ideas will be to my leadership 'toolbox'.

Olivia Thorn, Journalist, Australian Broadcast Corporation, Kojonup, WA – AgriFutures





I recently completed the TRAIL 18 program and found it to be a highly valuable experience. The program provided strong practical insight into media engagement, particularly how to approach discussions with clarity, confidence and purpose. It also strengthened my broader leadership capability, reinforcing the importance of clear communication, adaptability and leading with intent. Overall, it was a well-run program that has added real value to how I operate as a leader.

**Jerome O'Malley, Manager, CBH Group,
Merredin, WA – CBH Group**



The TRAIL program was a life changing experience for me where I learned a lot about myself and made some incredible connections with people from all over the country. The mix of interactive learning, challenging experiences and self-reflection was great, and I have come away from the experience feeling much more present and with a new sense of self belief and confidence. The leadership skills and knowledge I have learned from the program will be invaluable for whatever is next in my leadership and advocacy journey and I can't wait to put them into practice and stand up for rural Australia. Everything about the program was great and it is an honour to become part of the ARLF community, and I hope to continue connecting and growing with some great people.

Lachie Biglin, Agronomist, Nutrien Ag Solutions, Kondinin, WA – Grains Research and Development Corporation





Participating in the TRAIL program has led me to face core leadership beliefs and deconstruct fundamental complications in my leadership abilities. TRAIL has highlighted elements within me that I didn't previously value and being emotionally & physically challenged in the most intentional way made me realise that I had the key the entire time, the program gave me the skills and tools to identify & unlock a door that I had let the weeds overgrow. I will be forever grateful for my TRAIL cohort, Simone and Benny and to the ARLF for offering the scholarship for this experience.

Lauren Edwards, Grazier, Western Valley Agriculture, Kulwin, NSW – Matilda Ferguson Scholarship



ARLF TRAIL was honestly a life-changing experience. The idea of Yindymarra — slowing down, being patient, kind and respectful, and really being present — kept coming up and felt like the foundation of good leadership. TRAIL gave me the space to step back, learn more about myself, and reflect on how I show up as a leader. The experiential learning really stood out — having the chance to try things, make mistakes, and learn in a safe and supportive environment. The networks, shared experiences, group facilitation, and the mental and physical challenges all stretched me in different ways and gave me a stack of practical skills that I'm looking forward to sharing with our team.

Janelle Montgomery, CottonInfo Program Manager, CRDC, Moree, NSW – Cotton Research & Development Corporation





This is a truly unique environment which creates space for your leadership to be in challenged in unexpected ways. The facilitators have a genuine passion for their roles, and this is shown in the way they show up. You may be nervous about applying but you definitely will not regret it.

William Croft, Supply Operations Manager, Syngenta, Camperdown, NSW – Syngenta



People say life changing and you think, yeah right. I genuinely think it has. It took how I operated and turned it on its head. It was a week of big learnings, challenges, self-reflection, but also connection and big love. I will always be eternally grateful for the opportunity.

Grace Griffiths, Business Operations and Agronomy Manager, Data Ag / Griffiths Farming, Goondiwindi, QLD – Cotton Research & Development Corporation





The TRAIL emerging leaders' course was an amazing experience. It took us to our limits and provided a foundation that can be used to build processes and strategies to carry us and our teams through challenging times.

**Stephanie Dickson, Senior Project Officer,
Bureau of Meteorology, Ngunnawal, ACT
– Bureau of Meteorology**



14 Wormald Street, Symonston ACT 2609
(02) 6281-0680
info@rural-leaders.org.au

rural-leaders.org.au



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