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# **KEEPING UNDER 35's IN THE RANGELANDS: WHY THEY STAY, AND WHY THEY GO**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Many reasons are cited why young people are not entering and/or staying in rural industries, most commonly competition for other industry sectors, including mining. (Dyer 2007)

The North Australian Pastoral Company (NAPCO) employs over 200 people on cattle stations across the Northern Territory and Queensland. NAPCO has collated data about some of the motivations, primarily in relation to its own operations, seeking feedback about the company as an employer.

The Future Farmers Network (FFN) is a national non-for-profit 700 member organisation run by young people to support others pursuing careers in rural industries. As part of the 2007 'Should I Stay, or Should I Go?' project, funded by Industry Partnerships Programme of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, FFN investigated the reasons for staying and leaving rural industries, and recommendations from young people to improve the status.

This paper provides data from these and other organisations and highlights key areas to improve the attraction and retention of young people in rural industries that can be applied across Australia's rangelands.

## **METHODOLOGY**

NAPCO carries out annual surveys of existing employees during the middle of the work season (approximately in June) and ad-hoc surveys of exiting employees, at the time of departure. Both surveys are one page in length and ask questions in relation to the employee's perception about workplace relations and conditions, as well as the employee's background prior to commencing with NAPCO; rating of wages, training, facilities, safety and relationships with others; and recommendations for improvement.

In both cases, approximately 40-50% surveys are returned, possibly slightly higher from existing employees. The data presented in this paper are the results from 2006 and 2007 for both groups of employees. They include data from all age groups, but the majority of these (75%) re less than 25 years or age.

During 2007, FFN ran several forums as part of the 'Should I Stay, or Should I Go?' project, during which they encouraged participants to discuss the reasons they have continued to pursue a career in rural industries, or why they would possibly leave or have left. This culminated in a national teleconference, with representatives from all states and territories. The responses presented are a summary of these discussions.

## **RESULTS**

### **NAPCO**

The majority of employees decide to work with NAPCO due to their understanding or their perceptions about career opportunities and the stability of the company, and therefore their employment. Another important factor is the reputation of the company within the industry, which is closely aligned to the third factor, 'word of mouth' referrals. Surprisingly, advertising and the internet were not strong referral agents during the sample period, although more recent data (not yet fully analysed) suggests otherwise.

Employees were asked to rate NAPCO's performance in the following areas related to employment conditions. While the question did not directly ask 'why do you stay?' the responses represent to some degree, the reasons for staying. On a sliding scale, current employees rated the following in order: Living conditions (highest), Workplace safety, Working conditions, Structured training, Provision of information about policies and procedures, On the job training, Wages, Recreational facilities and Performance feedback (lowest).

Anecdotally, they stay because they have a good relationship with the people they work with, particularly their immediate supervisor and manager. They stay because they enjoy the lifestyle and interactions with others, the flexibility and in the case of the keen horsemen and women, the ability to combine work and recreation.

The primary reason employees cease employment is due to a poor relationship(s) with other employees on the property, primarily their immediate supervisor. Other significant reasons provided include injury or medical reasons, or family and personal reasons.

Exiting employees were also asked how NAPCO performed in the same areas. These terminating employees rated the same aspects in a slightly different order: Structured training, Living conditions, Working conditions, Workplace safety, Wages, Provision of information about policies and procedures, On the job training, Recreational facilities and Performance feedback.

When asked what could be improved within NAPCO to make it a better workplace, the two groups have differing views. Current employees tended to focus on material items that improve their living and working standards, while exiting employees focused on improving leadership, relationships and communication.

#### Future Farmers Network

A general theme expressed by forum respondents was an attraction to rural industries because of positive experiences in their formative years. For example, they'd grown up in a regional town or on a property and saw a positive career and lifestyle choice in staying on. Other positive experiences were formed by respondents, even if they had an urban upbringing, from visiting friends or family on farm or completing agricultural studies at school.

The respondents declared their intention to 'stay' because they are focused on the future, educated and keen to make a difference. In saying that, the majority of members/respondants manage their own primary production business/consultancy or have a professional role within an agribusiness or government agency. They are aware of the career pathways and opportunities available in the rural sector and are keen to share these.

Three key factors for 'going' were cited by the forum respondents. In no particular order these are generalised into poor remuneration, generational issues and isolation. Rural and agricultural employers inability to 'package' their employee benefits (i.e. housing, room and board, vehicle, fuel etc) to make them look attractive against the net disposable income offered in urban and 'fly in fly out' industries was cited as a source of frustration. So too was the continuing promotion of the 'Bad News Bush' where drought, flood, fire and despair are the continuing media themes. Against this background respondents were often working with a disgruntled or weary older generation with little or no input into strategic decision making and succession planning.

To counter this, respondents had three core themes they wished to engage with. These were to 'sell' the positive lifestyle through their networks and access to local politicians/media, create greater awareness of career opportunities and the variety of jobs available in regional areas and rural industries, and finally, to work 'smarter' using available technology and business structures.

## CONCLUSION

A number of data collection exercises have been undertaken or are underway to capture the issues, opinions and possible solutions to attract and retain young people in regional communities and rural industries.

Australia's Youth Infront was the theme of Year of the Outback 2006 and a report coordinated by the Australian Outback Development Consortium Ltd in partnership with the Australian government. The report documents the responses of over 200 young people captured between July and October 2006. The Victorian Government also ran an inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities in 2006.

In Central Queensland, a scoping study and synergy analysis commissioned by the Australian Agricultural College Corporation is about to be launched entitled 'Recruitment and Training Strategies to Attract Skilled Workers into the Agricultural and Pastoral Industries of Central Queensland' (Liz Alexander, Blue Dog Agribusiness, personal communication).

The data collected from NAPCO and FFN show similarities and disparities between the groups of respondents. There are several possible reasons for the disparities, relating to the age, family circumstances, profession and employment status of the individual (i.e. full time employee versus self-employed within family enterprise, professional versus operational employment).

However, it is the similarities that are striking, particularly in the area of relationships, inclusion in decision-making processes and succession planning/career progression. This is an area where young people are looking for support and direction to ensure a long term future for themselves in rural industries.

The NAPCO and FFN findings along with the reports mentioned above should be considered when thinking about attraction and retention strategies for under 35s in the rangelands. This disparate age group is a striking example of the 'one size fits all' solution not working. It is made up of individuals who wish to be consulted and challenged in their career choices and remunerated in keeping with their lifestyle choices.

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