

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #69

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Topic: The horticultural industry cannot grow the WPS whereas the meat processing industry offers more promise

The Work Placement Scheme (WPS) began in January 2005 with the placement of young Indigenous people from Cape York Peninsula into unsubsidised fruit picking work in the Riverland region of South Australia, the Murray Valley and Sunraysia regions of Victoria.

The horticultural industry was chosen for its abundance of unskilled work believed to be ideal for young unskilled Indigenous people with minimal education and no work experience. Ironically, the industry that helped establish the WPS is now holding it back. This note discusses the limitations of the horticultural industry and my move towards the meat processing industry which holds more promise.

A number of Work Group Supervisors are employed to provide ongoing effective support and supervision. This is a vital structural component of the WPS. These Work Group Supervisors are mainly sourced through MADEC Employment Services based in Mildura. Most of the applicants are unemployed rural labourers living in the region who may or may not have previous supervisory experience or knowledge of the local horticultural labour market. None of them have ever worked with young Indigenous people from remote northern communities. I have received no applications from experienced professionally qualified people. Over the past 2½ years, we have employed over 18 Work Group Supervisors and very few lasted more than 2 or 3 months. Their reasons for leaving or being told to leave fall into one of three broad categories - 1) private domestic problems; 2) inability to carry out their duties without close supervision, and 3) lack of knowledge and skills in behavioural management. This, combined with huge seasonal fluctuations in employment and the general instability of the horticultural industry, is now seriously hampering the development of the WPS.

August 2005 saw the 5 month trial of placing 5 selected young people from the Renmark fruit picking group with Tatiara Meats as meat process workers in the Bordertown abattoir. This trial was based on the need to overcome my inability to recruit suitable Work Group Supervisors and to seek out more stable industries willing and able to employ large numbers of young unskilled workers. The trial was conducted without a Work Group Supervisors so to test the effectiveness of the other structural components of the scheme to maintaining the participants in their employment. This trial found that the meat processing industry did offer many full-time employment opportunities for unskilled workers and that an on-site Work Group Supervisors was not essential for selected participants to maintain their employment in this line of work. **It was their behaviour outside of work that proved to be a problem which eventually affected their work performance and threatened their employment.** This finding was consistent with our lettuce picking group at Wemen, Victoria, when their employer reported achieving a better result without the presence

of our WGS. Whereas, their behaviour outside of work was, at times, very difficult to manage.

September 2006 saw the establishment of the Wonthaggi abattoir group in Victoria, based upon the learnings of the Bordertown Trial and the Wemen group. This group has no on-site Work Group Supervisor. Instead, it has an off-site Supervisor, Cook and Domestic Support Worker which it is working well. The young people enjoy this type of work much more than fruit picking. It provides them with better working conditions, a greater and more stable income, on-site training and nationally credited qualifications. All participants live in rental houses with individual bedrooms. The abattoir uses their own on-site work supervisors who appear to be more effective than those employed by the WPS for the horticultural groups. They are also offering more full-time permanent positions than could ever be provided from the horticultural industry. The clear conclusion is that the WPS should seek ways to minimise our reliance on the horticultural industry and on-site WGS and focus more on the meat processing industry and the provision of off-site support and supervision. This is what the scheme has sought to do in recent months, whereby, the horticultural industry has been used as the entry point only – an Intake Group. Good workers are quickly moved on to the Wonthaggi meat works.

Discussions are now taking place with Fletcher International at Albany in Western Australia. It has received good reports from TABRO Meats in Wonthaggi and has placed an order for 50 young people for immediate start.

This has created a new problem. We now have only one single entry point to the Scheme - the Renmark fruit picking group which is still troubled by the lack of suitable supervisors, regular employment and a shortage of suitable accommodation. This is proving to be a real problem as it holds back our expansion into the meat processing industry.

The proposed solution to this problem is the resurrection of the *Boys from the Bush* (BftB) program as an assessment tool and a secondary means of preparing young people for entry to the meat processing industry. The BftB program will also be used for the assessment and training of on-site and off-site supervisors. This program will enable assessment and training to be done closer to home in a more familiar environment and where there is greater access to more experienced professional support.

14 June 2007