

2025 TRAIL: Emerging Leaders Program

Program Report



Introduction

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF), through the TRAIL Emerging Leaders Program, cultivates networks of emerging leaders across rural, regional, and remote Australia. This cross-sectoral, challenge-based program provides participants with immersive experiences designed to build essential skills, foster strategic thinking, and enhance collaboration.

Tailored for individuals recently stepping into leadership roles or seeking to expand their leadership practice, TRAIL focuses on the following objectives:

- Enhancing self-awareness through the ARLF's six core areas of leadership practice.
- Exploring leadership enablers such as values, social responsibility, negotiation, critical thinking and leading in complexity.
- Provide opportunities to build lasting personal and professional relationships with the ARLF's network of alumni.
- Establishing structured pathways for ongoing leadership growth.
- Developing adaptable leadership practices responsive to complex community, workplace, sectoral or regional challenges.

Central to TRAIL is the development of personal leadership action plans, participation in scenario-based exercises and fostering effective communication through courageous conversations. This experiential approach, grounded in Kolb's learning theory, equips participants to confidently lead with integrity, authenticity and purpose in an increasingly dynamic and changing world.

Program overview

This year, 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.

The cohort then gathered at Old Parliament House for a fireside yarn with leaders from four advocacy groups shaping rural, regional, and remote Australia. This session featured Suzi Tegen (National Rural Health Alliance), Natalie Collard (Farmers for Climate Action), Troy Williams (National Farmers' Federation) and Ken Dachi (Welcoming Australia). Together, they explored the critical role advocacy plays in shaping policy and driving meaningful change across rural, regional, and remote Australia.

Following this session, participants engaged with political staffers at Parliament House, 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 self-advocacy.

Next, participants moved into the challenge-based outdoor phase of the program, set within the stunning Namadgi National Park. Through a series of outdoor challenges which included bushwalking, abseiling, caving and raft building, participants engaged in thought-provoking discussions, reflecting on their behaviours, mindsets and values. These activities encouraged them to explore alternative perspectives on leadership and challenges, deepening their understanding of how others navigate complexity.

The final stage of the program featured ARLF Fellow Dan Bouchier (ABC journalist) and Jonathan Watchman 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, aided by applying their understanding of DISC behavioural profiling to their messaging, equipping them with the skills to engage stakeholders with confidence.

As the program drew to a close, participants



"I would definitely recommend it for other people that are hands on learners. Couldn't fault anything I enjoyed all my time there"

Jesse Janes
TRAIL 2025 Participant

gathered around the fire for an evening with Her Excellency the Governor-General, Sam Mostyn AC, where she 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.

TRAIL 17 (2025) cohort

Participant	State	Organisation
Amy Hunter	WA	CBH Group
Andric Lu	QLD	Queensland Health
Angus Dunne	ACT	SNSW Innovation Hub
Bonnie Armour	SA	Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board
Brittany Bickford	VIC	Rural Bank (Bendigo Bank)
Charlene Cressbrook	QLD	Cape York Natural Resource Management
Christine Plummer	NSW	LLS NSW
Dale McDonald	NSW	Base Five Co - Health
Dimity Betts	NSW	Hunter New England Primary Health Network (The PHN)
Emma Frankel-Vaughan	SA	Viterra
Emma Wostear	QLD	Pakaderinga Feedlot
Frances Kirby	SA	Australian Migrant Resource Centre
Gabrielle Chaffey	NSW	Syngenta
Jesse Janes	VIC	Kinross Farms (Sponsored by Australian Eggs)
Joe Gibson	Vic	goFARM
John Butler	SA	Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board
Joshua Petty	QLD	Whyalla Beef
Kelsie Prowse	SA	The Apple Farm
Kimberley Kunde	QLD	Red Earth Community Foundation
Krystie Bremer	WA	Gascoyne Catchments Group Inc
Linda Vernon	WA	North Eastern Wheatbelt Travel Association
Lucy Gallagher	NSW	Tarrabah Pastoral Co.
Madison Tims	NSW	Thoroughbred Breeders Australia (Sponsored by AgriFutures Australia)
Michelle Ware	QLD	Torres Strait Regional Council (Sponsored by Torres Strait Regional Authority)
Rebekah Haase	QLD	Grey Galah Bed and Breakfast
Remy Malet	WA	Carbon Sync
Renee Bester	QLD	Etheridge Shire Council
Sarah Tsai	NT	Northern Territory Government
Sharna Holman	QLD	Queensland Department of Primary Industries (Sponsored by Cotton Research & Development Corporation)
Tammy O'Malley	SA	Coorong District Council

Participant feedback

At the conclusion of the program, we ask participants to provide feedback on various aspects, including their registration and onboarding experience, as well as the program itself.

Below are some key metrics from this feedback process:

- » 100% of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the program, with an average score of 4.89 on a scale from 1-5.
- » 89% of TRAIL participants would recommend the program to a friend or colleague, which reflects the strong positive impact and value that participants attribute to the program. (NPS score = 89 on scale from -100 to 100, as there were no detractors).
- » 96% of participants rated the connections made with other participants as being very or extremely meaningful.
- » 100% of participants expressed an interest in further leadership development through the ARLF.

As part of the program's debrief, facilitators were also asked about their insights into the program and the cohort. Simone Carroll-Germech, TRAIL Program Manager and facilitator, commented on the cohort's ongoing impact:



"The TRAIL participants are always a pleasure to work with, bringing an open mindset and a willingness to identify blind spots early in their leadership journey. However, this year's cohort was truly exceptional. From the very first day, they gave their all, fully embracing both the experience and the strength of their network. Their depth of thinking, adaptability and engagement were remarkable, instilling in me a deep confidence that the future of leadership in rural, regional and remote Australia is in excellent hands."

Our TRAIL participants spoke of the 'life-changing' nature of the program; facilitators were commended on their caring and nurturing attitude and their effectiveness in adapting their style to suit different personalities in the group. Many also spoke of the richness and impactful nature of the program and experience, where they learned more about self and others due to the physical nature of the program design and related activities.

One participant described the program's ongoing impact vividly: "...I was looking for a water shed moment, and I found a tsunami." Others spoke of a perfect storm, with the content, the cohort, their own lives and busyness coming together to create a life-changing experience.

"Learning has really been a constant in my life, and this experience was a chance to both gain the insight and experience as a leader and a follower. The program set all of us up with opportunities to test and explore different ways of being in a leadership role, or to flesh out what leadership actually meant for us as individuals."

Dale McDonald
TRAIL 2025 Participant



Program evolution

Drawing upon the insights gathered from our TRAIL participants and facilitators we have identified the following key areas for ongoing consideration:

- » Consistent messaging regarding program requirements and expectations.
- » User-friendliness of systems used for registration.

We are very grateful for all the feedback we have received from this year's TRAIL cohort and are working to implement the following in response to ensure we continue to deliver an excellent and impactful experience for all participants:

- » We are working to ensure a more unified and consistent user experience for registrations, and to make sure the information provided is similar regardless of what platform is used to share that information (email, Mighty Networks social media platform, etc.).
- » Continuing to review our program schedule to allow for more time for reflection, grounding and connecting.



"The TRAIL program not only gives you those technical capabilities, but it gives you the safe space to push outside your comfort zone around people that you haven't known for very long, but you're all there for the same reason."

Renee Bester
TRAIL 2025 Participant



"I've realised I don't have to know everything. I really learned that this week, knowledge is one thing, but having these leadership skills is so much more important, because we'll never stop learning, and everybody has knowledge and experiences to share, and we can all grow from the connections we make because of that."

Lucy Gallagher,
TRAIL 2025 Participant



A message for our 2025 TRAIL partners

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 lasting legacy these graduates will create through their collective leadership.



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“Mel, Benny and Lauren were the most incredible people to have alongside us in our journey. They all taught me a huge amount as a person and as a leader. The people in our group and the connections we have all built with each other is a reflection on the leaders that our mentors and facilitators are.”

TRAIL 2025 Participant



“The experience was definitely one of deep learning. It definitely stretched me further than I’ve ever been stretched in any of the leadership training that I’ve done.”

Tammy O’Malley
TRAIL 2025 Participant



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