

In the saddle, giving rein to boyhood dreams

Patricia Karvelas, Political correspondent | November 15, 2008

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WHEN William Miller was a boy, his father would fill his head with stories about life on the cattle station. The stories would mesmerise William, who decided he wanted to follow in his dad's footsteps.

"Just hearing about being on horseback, and herding cattle, it sounded really good," Mr Miller said. "This work has been in the family. My father was a station man. I wanted to do what my dad did."

But much has changed since his father was a stockman 30 years ago. Back then it was common to have Aboriginal men working on farms in the outback. But gradually the number of indigenous stockmen has dwindled. Now the Rudd Government, along with the Indigenous Land Corporation, is to unveil an indigenous training and employment package for rural and remote Australia that will dramatically increase places and stop the decline in the number of Aboriginal stockmen.

The scheme will provide 530 certificate-level training places and employment for up to 400 indigenous graduates in the pastoral, tourism and resource sectors and in ILC businesses. These include cattle and sheep production, horticulture, transport and administration.

The ILC has committed \$9.1million, with the Rudd Government providing \$5.7million for the three-year scheme. And the Government has indicated it would dramatically expand the program over coming years. It will form part of mining billionaire Andrew Forrest's bold scheme with the Rudd Government and business to create 50,000 jobs for Aborigines. The Weekend Australian has learnt 7000 jobs have been secured since the scheme was announced in August.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin said an important element of the training to employment package would be the development of relationships

with the mining, oil and gas industries over the next three years to broaden job choices for graduates.

The ILC operates 14 businesses across Australia ranging from large cattle stations and tourism operations in the north, to wool and sheep properties in the south.

The training to employment package will be delivered through training centres based on ILC-operated businesses at Roebuck Plains Station near Broome, Home Valley Station in the East Kimberley, Waliburru Station in the NT, Crocodile Welcome Station on Cape York, Urannah Station near Townsville and on a smaller scale through eight other ILC businesses across Australia.

Mr Miller, 19, has worked for a year doing a Certificate 2 in agriculture and on-site work as a station hand on an ILC-owned property near Broome. "I love this work. It gets us away from town and teaches us to be independent and just working and learning at the same time, and we get paid for it," he said. "When I pass my Certificate 2 I can get any job in any station. That's what I want to do."

ILC chairwoman Shirley McPherson said indigenous leaders across the country wanted Aboriginal people to be part of the mainstream economy and in doing so share in the benefits just as other Australians do.

She said ILC businesses were being developed as hubs for learning and accredited training to make people employment-ready for a range of mainstream businesses.

"The ILC businesses provide on-site resources, including personnel, residential accommodation and operational equipment on a scale that is generally not available in rural and remote areas," Ms McPherson said.

Mr Forrest, chief executive of Fortescue Metals, welcomed the announcement of the training and employment package.

"It is an encouraging start but we have a long way to go."