

Scholarship winner: beef industry innovator

Dalene Wray, winner of the 2018 CEW Austrade Women in Export Scholarship, is a champion for diversity and ethical business, and is driving change in an agricultural industry ripe for innovation.

Consumer demand for ethical production and product transparency is shaking up industries the world over – including Australia’s beef industry. Beef is a major commodity, with Australia one of the world’s largest exporters. At the forefront of innovation in this centuries-old industry is Dalene Wray, Managing Director of OBE Organic.

Established in 1994, OBE Organic was Australia’s first organic beef exporter, founded by a group of beef producers including Wray’s father, David Brook OAM. The company opened up a new market for remote cattle producers, and today is still run on cooperative principles.

“We’re trying very hard to work in the best interests of our suppliers, and a number of our suppliers are also shareholders in our company,” says Wray, who joined OBE Organic in 2003 and has worked across all facets of the business.

The scale of the company’s operation is huge, spanning 7 million hectares, primarily in the Lake Eyre Basin, which straddles Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory and New South Wales. Beef is supplied by a core group of farming families who collectively process around 12,000 cattle each year.

What makes OBE Organic unique is that its cattle are allowed to roam freely across vast organic plains virtually untouched by intensive agriculture and associated chemicals such as herbicides and pesticides. The animals feed on more than 250 species of native grasses and plants, rather than set pasture, and choose their food according to their dietary needs and what is in season.

Innovation has been at the heart of OBE Organic’s business model since its inception, and now, with Wray at the helm, the company is taking even greater strides. A champion for diversity and ethical business, Wray is leading positive change within the company and across the agriculture industry.

High-stakes innovation

In 2015, Wray launched OBE Organic’s industry-leading sustainability program, FLOURISH, making it one of the first Australian beef supply chains to formally manage sustainability. Wray also led the development in 2017 of the company’s first Reconciliation Action Plan, and is using social media to engage with consumers in an authentic and meaningful way

“We are looking to be a catalyst for positive change in our industry, and we are focused on collaborating actively and operating with transparency,” she says. “What’s exciting for me is that consumers are having a voice now, and they’re able to demand food that is clean and safe and free from chemicals.”

In recognition of her innovative work, Wray was awarded the 2018 CEW Austrade Women in Export Scholarship delivered in partnership by Austrade and Chief Executive Women. The scholarship will take Wray to Boston, Massachusetts in July to attend Harvard Business School’s Disruptive Innovation – Strategies for a Successful Enterprise course.

“I’m really excited to go out of my comfort zone and have the opportunity to learn at Harvard Business School,” says Wray. “I’m also excited about the network that I’ll be building. And then potentially being able to use that for the benefit of regional and remote Australia, and also agriculture in general.”

Having lived in remote Australia, Europe and Asia, Wray brings to the industry both local insight and a global perspective.

Born and raised in Channel Country in southwest Queensland, she trained as a radiographer and worked in regional hospitals in Queensland and New South Wales before moving to Europe where she worked as a radiographer and a tour guide, learning French and Spanish. She joined OBE Organic as Business Development Manager in 2003, and six years later, she left Australian shores once again, relocating with her husband to Hong Kong as Regional Manager for Asia, and returning in 2014.

Asia is one of OBE Organic’s four key markets, with the company’s first kilo of beef ever sold going to Japan in 1998. Currently, around 60% of OBE’s beef is exported to the US, with the remaining 40% split between Asia, the Middle East and the domestic market.

Driving diversity and inclusion

Today, Brisbane-based Wray has one eye on the international market and one eye closer to home. Through her involvement in committees and industry organisations, she has become an important voice for regional, rural and remote Australia.

“I really enjoy bringing an agricultural lens to conversations that haven’t had an agricultural lens before,” she says. “And making sure that when decisions are made – whether they’re in our capital cities or in our capital – we do remember to consider regional and remote communities.”

Wray is a member of the Telstra Queensland Regional Advisory Committee and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Council for Australian Arab Relations, and is also an Industry Advisory Group Member for the Australian Government Farm Co-operatives and Collaboration pilot program.

She also champions opportunities for women in agriculture and in leadership positions.

“My [career] progression has been enabled by both male and female mentors who have supported me into the position I’m in – particularly while having three children,” she says.

While living in HK, Dalene sharpened her focus on innovation and diversity thanks to an Australian Chamber of Commerce mentoring program that saw her paired with senior executive Deirdre Lander. “I see that a lot of women aren’t afforded those same support networks. And because I’ve lived the experience, I think I can provide some valuable insights to the people who are making the decisions.”

Wray points out that in the Middle East, where she frequently travels for work, many women hold leadership roles in the agriculture industry, including in government portfolios, but she sees a lack of senior women in Australia.

“We need to make sure we’ve got women in leadership positions in agriculture who can engage with women in other parts of the world,” she says. “I think having conversations around maternity leave and returning to work is very important.”

Wray is a bold change-maker in an industry ripe for innovation. When she heads to Boston’s Harvard Business School in July, she will be learning about theories and real-world examples of disruptive innovation, and exploring how she can apply these back home.

“I think there are so many opportunities that we haven’t capitalised on in rural and remote areas and also in agriculture. I really look forward to learning innovative techniques to solving some of the complex problems that we have in Australia.”