

Planting the seed

SUNRAYSIA students have been “immersed” in the local horticulture industry as part of an educational entrée to the wider sector.

The Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network spent the 2023 academic year leading an industry and educational coalition designed to give secondary school students an introduction to the opportunities available in horticulture, through both learning more about the career pathways and getting a better awareness of the modern technology being used in the sector.

Chaffey Secondary College, Mildura Specialist School, Irymple Secondary College, Merbein P10 College and Red Cliffs Secondary College were all involved in the Northern Mallee Horticulture Immersion Program.

It was a nine-week program during the school year, with a new group rotating each term, and all participating students also attended the Chaffey Secondary College Farm on Fridays each week.

Some of the student time was spent engaging in daily activities at the Chaffey SC farm and learning in the classroom – but participants also were given the opportunity to tour local industries such as citrus and almond farms, nurseries, research laboratories, processing facilities, smart farms and other horticulture-related sites.

Pieter Van Zyl and Jane Finch, from Select Harvests, and Dr Zelmari Coetzee, from Agriculture Victoria’s SmartFarm, also took part in the program, helping to shine a light on the almond industry.

Chaffey Secondary College student Destiny



Field trips and visits to local companies gave students an idea of the scale of the Sunraysia horticulture industry.

French said she has enjoyed being involved in the program.

“One of the highlights for me was going to the almond visit and getting to know about the hulling and different types of almonds,” she said.

The Year 10 student said out of all the careers that were explored during the NMHIP, being an agronomist looked the most appealing.

Destiny’s grandparents live on a farm and she added: “What sparked my interest was that further into it we could get jobs.”

Chaffey Secondary College’s executive principal Graeme Forrester said the economic impact the horticulture industry had in Sunraysia was significant.

“It’s supporting every single person in this district,” he said.

Mr Forrester said it was important to showcase the technology and skills that were needed to grow high-quality crops.

“A few years ago, the National Skills Commission indicated it was probably one of the fastest-growing industries, yet when you talk to so many people about agriculture and horticulture, they think it’s about picking and packing, and there’s actually a lot more than that,” he said.

Mr Forrester said he would like Vocational Education and Training (VET) Agriculture and Horticulture to become available for the region’s students in Year 10 and 11 delivered at Chaffey SC Farm.

He said the school had a farm that was located in the centre of Mildura, making it very accessible.

“We’d like to develop the farm and for it to be used for the whole town rather than just us, it’s a great facility,” Mr Forrester said.

Fifty students commenced the program over three terms this year, with a new group starting each term. Due to the participation and delivery success of the NMHI Project, Term 4 also saw another group sign on for the nine weeks.

NMHI Project is led by the Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network, in partnership with Chaffey Secondary College, regional secondary schools, community organisations and industry with funding from the Victorian Government’s Secondary School Agriculture Fund supported by Agriculture Victoria.

Talks are still under way to see if the program will resume this year.