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Women vital link in primary industry change

A 'mighty big aspiration' to find a balance between food production, the environment and people came a step closer last week when 14 women involved in primary industries graduated from a national leadership and governance programme.

Now in its seventh year, the Agri-Women's Development Trust (AWDT) Escalator programme has so far produced 98 graduates. More than 30 alumni members supported the 2017 group along with other industry leaders at the graduation ceremony in Wellington.

Speaking at the event, AWDT founder and executive director, Lindy Nelson, said New Zealand's primary sector was going through a period of exponential change not seen before. "No matter how we produce and transport our food to consumers, there is an impact. That impact sits with us and the time to act is now.

"Women are vital in creating the change needed to achieve a balance between production, profit and the planet. They represent 50 percent of our sector's talent; their diversity is sorely needed and that fits with global thinking about women's empowerment."

Mrs Nelson said the Escalator graduates leave the programme understanding the intersection between their skills, where they can be applied and the energy that drives them.

"The added element is that these women tie their dreams to the betterment of their communities and industries. For them, creating change is less about leadership roles and more about leadership behaviour."

Also speaking at the graduation, AWDT Escalator Alumni member, Julia Jones, of KPMG urged the graduates to have the courage to do things differently. "AWDT has created a flight path for change and as graduates of this programme you are now on that path. There is a need to foresee things but it's hard to create change.

"We get a bit scared in New Zealand and tend to wait and wait until someone else makes the first move. If you're not scared every day then you're not living. The gateway to success is celebrating failure. If we fail then learn and grow from that, then we're failing for the right reasons."

The 2017 graduates come from Northland to Otago, and work in dairy, sheep and beef farming, science, marketing, animal health, health and safety, Māori agribusiness, and central and local government.

Created as a result of AWDT's research into the role of women in agriculture and low participation at leadership and governance levels, the Escalator programme includes five Wellington-based modules over 10 months, distance learning, coaching and mentoring.

Mrs Nelson said graduates were taking on significant leadership roles in often-complex and challenging initiatives with major economic, environmental and social impacts. They were also leading within industry organisations, corporates and sitting at the decision-making table in governance.

Since its establishment in 2010, AWDT has delivered leadership, governance and business development and support to more than 2,200 people in partnership with ANZ, Beef + Lamb New Zealand, DairyNZ, FMG, Agmardt, Ravensdown, Red Meat Profit Partnership, CRS Software, NZX Agri and KPMG.