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Aborigines to relearn the land

They share the same horesmen's gait, favour the same stockmen's gear of moleskins and battered hats, and have a similar vision of training young Aborigines in the pastoral sector.

To cement their intentions, graziers, elders and teachers will today sign a memorandum of understanding in the heart of cattle country at Rockhampton in central Queensland.

Aborigines will be trained by Aborigines in rural management, employment and training under the agreement, to be signed by rural producer group AgForce, the Fitzroy Basin elders committee and Emerald Agricultural College.

It follows more than a year of talks between elders and rural producers who want to revive the role of Aborigines in the cattle industry.

The Indigenous Land Council has bought 112 pastoral properties, placing large tracts of Australia's grazing land in control of Aboriginal groups.

AgForce board member Peter Kenny said Aborigines own properties that could run 100,000 breeding cattle and that land may become non-viable unless properly managed.

Many of the properties bought for Aboriginal communities were leased to white pastoral companies, with resultant loss of opportunity for communities to become self-sufficient, provide employment and skills for young people, and help maintain traditions.

The three parties agreed there was an opportunity to support a concept under which Aborigines could be empowered to work and manage their own properties.

An agricultural college is proposed on land to be bought through the ILC, where young people will work with Aboriginal trainers who themselves will be trained and mentored by Emerald Agricultural College staff.

Fitzroy elder and former head stockman Kevin Albury said the place for young Aborigines was in the bush, where they could learn the skills of the pastoral industry and work on the land.

It was the connection with these elders that drove rural leaders such as Kenny to pursue the training concept.

"Peter has gone the extra mile with this project. You can see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice, and know that it means something in his heart," said elders' spokeswoman Margaret Hornagold.

"The old fellows pick up on that and know that they are in tune with each other."