

Industry Spotlight: Celese Smit

Passion, Persistence and Practical Experience.

Celese's path into the primary industries began on her family's sheep and beef farm. Growing up surrounded by animals, she learned early the rhythm of the land, the care it takes to manage livestock, and the satisfaction of seeing crops thrive under careful stewardship. This hands-on upbringing instilled in her both a practical understanding of farming and a curiosity for science and innovation.

Given Celese's ag-heavy upbringing, by the time she reached her first year at Fielding High School, her interest in the primary industries had already begun to take shape. It was there where her interest was nurtured and given direction. The school's strong connection to the land and its working farm environments created an authentic learning experience where students could see the direct application of science in production systems. Celese found herself drawn to classes that were hands-on and immersive.

"Year 9 and 10 ag was quite generalised, but it was probably one of the more practical classes. You were able to go over to the farm and see demonstrations of -



various processes like livestock handling and pasture and crop establishment. We were quite lucky."

Classroom experiments also extended to horticulture.

"I very vividly remember a study we had to do with potatoes. We were looking at different varieties and learned why we had to use different ones for different purposes."

Celese was fortunate to have mentorship from several dedicated educators including our very own Melanie Simmons who she highlights as someone who combined her ag expertise and guidance on pathways beyond school, placing emphasis on how important it is to continue bridging the gap between classroom and industry.

"One of the coolest things my teachers did was bring in people who had already worked in the industry, and they spoke to us about their careers. That gave you a good idea of what jobs were out there and what opportunities you could chase."

With this foundation, Celese decided

to pursue agribusiness at Massey University, majoring in agricultural science with a focus on agronomy.

University presented its own challenges. Celese initially aimed to become a soil scientist but soon realised her interest lay elsewhere after grappling with a notoriously difficult soils paper. Celese pivoted to agronomy, concentrating on crop systems and applied plant science. She found that agronomy is where her passion lay.

Celese's professional journey reflects her commitment to applied science. She now works at NuFarm, a leading supplier of crop protection products in New Zealand. The company provides herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, and plant growth regulators, supporting growers across a range of crops with products backed by international science and local expertise.

As a Technical Integrated Knowledge (TIK) specialist, Celese combines her agricultural and horticultural expertise. She coordinates multi-year trials, develops technical material for vegetables, subtropical crops, maize, and pasture, and helps bring new solutions to market.

"I went into my first role knowing absolutely nothing about some of the crops I worked with, but I was always open to learning new skills. Now my work is very split because I had an ag background and then horticultural experience, and I get the best of both worlds."

Celese credits her success in her field to proactive learning and supportive mentors.

"I've been lucky to have managers who leave me to it. For someone who needs guidance, that wouldn't work, but for me, it really empowered me to do what I want, and they support me."

Despite working in a male-dominated field, Celese has navigated challenges with confidence. She recalls attending conferences where she was often the only female in the room.

She emphasises the value of asking questions and building relationships and attributes her vast network to her ability to do so.

"The biggest thing you'll let yourself down on in this industry is relationships. Be friends with everyone you can. Don't burn bridges."

A final piece of advice that Celese offers, encourages aspiring students to be open and confident in their endeavours.

"You have to bet on yourself, be confident in your skills, always be open to learn, and communicate clearly what you want. It will take you far."

In a world where agriculture and horticulture are constantly evolving, Celese reminds us that the opportunities are vast for those who are willing to learn, and that the right guidance can make all the difference.