

## THE AUSTRALIAN

## Burning ambition rewarded with carbon cash

ROSIE LEWIS THE AUSTRALIAN MAY 19, 2015 12:00AM



Ranger Waylon Bramwell, 20, conducts a burn-off at Glen Garland on Oikola land on the Cape York peninsula. Picture: Brian Cassey Source: News Corp Australia

### The Oikola people are scattered across the country but Aboriginal elder Michael Ross wants them to come back home.

The cattleman is confident more of his people, a clan of about 500, will begin making that journey after the Oikola Aboriginal Corporation won a seven-year contract in the federal government's first emissions reduction auction last month.

The corporation, which Mr Ross heads, plans to capture 65,000 tonnes of carbon each year through early burning — a method used by the elder's family for generations — to reduce wildfires across its 766,272ha of land in central Cape York.

"This is one of the proudest things I've ever done for my people," Mr Ross said.

"We can look forward for the next seven years and know that we have an income coming in and we can delegate that out into jobs and look at more people coming home."

Oikola became one of the largest private land holders in Queensland last December when the state government handed back more than 633,630ha of land, as revealed in *The Weekend Australian*, after 30 years of campaigning. The Oikola people had been locked out of their traditional lands for almost a century. "We worked so hard to get our land back. After the handover on the 10th of December, it was another journey," Mr Ross said.

"It's not all about getting handouts. We have to make this land support the Oikola people for the journey home and put something back on to our country. It's a great hurdle we've overcome."

The corporation could not disclose how much the government would pay it but under the average auction price of \$13.95 per tonne it would receive \$906,750 a year.

The Oikola have a team of seven rangers aged 17 to 28. All were recently employed on a full-time, four-month contract.

Waylon Bramwell, Mr Ross's 20-year-old grandson, is one of the corporation's newest recruits. He grew up in Cooktown on Cape York's east coast but prefers being on country looking after the land and endangered golden-shouldered parrots. "It was good to go back on country. I'd rather be up there," he said. "I like working with the different rangers."

The Oikola have been reducing carbon emissions through early burning programs since 2013, with funding from conservation group The Nature Conservancy, but the auction contract is the first time it will receive such a long-term income.

The corporation's chief executive, Amanda Hogbin, said directors were looking at five new business opportunities, including a tourism venture.

"Having our young rangers out on the ground with the elders burning country and talking about that medicine tree or story place is really important for the social wellbeing of the Oikola people," she said.

Oikola was one of two successful Aboriginal companies in the auction, with the Pompuaraaw Aboriginal Shire Council, on the west coast of Cape York, also winning a seven-year contract to capture 30,000 tonnes of carbon.