



Photo by Tammie Reid

## Sleuthing for dieback

**PICTURED** with Kelm-scott District standards and training officer Abe van der Sande are new interpreters Dianne Pember and Leigh Trevor-row from the Kelm-scott Forest Management Branch team.

They were visiting the Huntley bauxite minesite, where they experienced a worm's eye view of the sub-surface topography.

Abe believes such insights help explain the difficult job forest interpreters face when predicting the behaviour of dieback (*Phytophthora cinnamomi*).

The photo shows the exposed caprock, cleared of all topsoil, before blasting and subsequent bauxite mining operations begin. The ridges, valleys, and mini lakes run in many directions, and not all are downslope.

"Our job is to predetermine the hazards and

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impacts of this disease which means we must find out what the drainage patterns beneath the surface are doing," said Abe.

"So this is a perfect opportunity for interpreters new to the game to get a feel for what we usually just walk over.

"Phytophthora is a water-borne organism, needing warmth and moisture, and often at caprock depth these conditions support the movement and development of the disease.

Dieback interpreters' work reads like a bush detective story. They painstakingly search for clues identifying the whereabouts of the 'villainous' *Phytophthora*, then demarcate and map the areas in which it occurs.

So what attracted Abe to this work?

"It was back in 1982, when Alan Lush (then Southern Forests Region planning officer with the Forests Department) recommended I consider this career move," Abe said.

"He thought my ability to work for long periods alone in the bush and still have an eye and aptitude for accuracy would hold me in good stead.

"But really it's the exercise and ecstasy that keeps me going," said Abe.

Apparently the ecstasy refers to adrenaline rushes experienced during snake and feral pig encounters, the constant barriers of water bush and that prickly wattle so aptly named 'buggery bush'. Deanne and Leigh wholeheartedly agree.

"It's a tough life, but someone's got to do it. Luckily, the Forest Management Branch blokes and blokesses are darned good at it!" Abe said.

