



NSW Farmers Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on NSW Farms

Our Purpose

To improve and maintain the mental health and wellbeing of the people in farming in NSW by using all available resources efficiently and effectively.

The Need

There is a growing body of evidence that the people in agriculture are not coping with the pressures that they face, and the mental illness that they experience. Farm male owners and managers commit suicide at around twice the rate of the national average.

There are many people and agencies contributing to ensuring the health and wellbeing of the farming sector in NSW. Each agency's work needs to be understood and recognised, and where possible there should be no duplication of effort or resources.

There is a body of evidence about what is effective in improving mental health and preventing suicide – this is summarised in a number of key Australian and NSW State Government Plans. The combined work of this network will contribute to achieving the planned National and NSW State Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention Australian outcomes.

The reasons that people commit suicide are very complex. Key risk factors in the pathways to personal and family breakdown, and potential pathways to maintenance of health and wellbeing are described.

“The Focus on resilience appears to have more efficacy, and is more empowering, with less risk of harm involved” NSW Suicide Prevention Strategy, 2004.

The Blueprint

The Blueprint is a simplified summary of key issues that need to be addressed, and the major actions that we can be confident will be effective in achieving our purpose.

The Blueprint in a Page

Pathways to breakdown

External pressures on the business

- Economic, markets
- Regulatory
- Climatic

High stress levels on the business, the family and individuals

Feelings of loss of control

Poor problem solving/ rigidity/ high expectations/difficulty coping with change

Loneliness/social isolation

Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, despair

Alcohol misuse

Lack of knowledge of /insight into nature of mental health problems in rural NSW/ available services

Clinical depression/ other mental disorders

Family breakdown

Previous suicide attempt / suicide threats/ suicide plans

Access to firearms

Suicide

Pathways to health 23 Areas of action

1. Advocacy for farm support
2. Advocacy for improved regulations
3. Advocacy for decentralisation of administration of program funds/resources

4. Programs to increase business, family and personal resilience
5. Access to Rural Financial Counsellors
6. Access to Drought Support Workers
7. Access to appropriate welfare support

8. Practical assistance in compliance with regulatory requirements

9. Change management skills development

10. Local community building programs – building social networks/opportunity.
11. Professional network building

12. Building positive view of farming from city perspective
13. Farm Pride campaign

14. Improved access to drug and alcohol programs and services

15. *Mental Health First Aid* training
16. Reducing stigma associated with mental disorder

17. Improved access to effective mental health solutions
18. Improved access to effective mental health services

19. Improved access to counseling services

20. Access to crisis lines

21. *Mental Health First Aid* for farm family members and community

22. Debriefing and counseling services
23. Appropriate media

Planned Programs on Pathways to Health

1. Advocacy For Farm Support

Programs of NSW Farmers in advocating for effective farm support during such times as drought and other difficult periods can contribute to reducing business pressures and thereby enhance mental health and wellbeing. Important action includes:

- Advocacy for farm support in times of need; and
- Advocacy for improved regulations

**Lead Action: NSW Farmers Association
and Country Women's Association of NSW**

2. Advocacy for Improved Regulations

There is evidence that compliance with the increasing regulatory requirements of Federal and State governments is difficult for farm businesses, particularly where human resources are tight, and where the regulations are difficult to understand and accept and where they appear to be overly complicated. NSW Farmers Association and others can play a key role in advocating for reduced complexity to meet the regulatory outcomes for the industry, thereby contributing to enhanced mental health and wellbeing. Active engagement of farmers in determining better systems will increase their sense of 'control' in the process.

Lead Action: NSW Farmers Association

3. Programs to Increase Business, Family and Personal Resilience

Managing the Pressures of Farming program

The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety has worked with farmers in north west NSW and identified key pressures that farms, farm families and individuals find most difficult to cope with. The project has produced a useful manual – *Managing the pressures of farming* – farm family business handbook, a farmer friendly maintenance check, with suggested options for reducing pressure that have been identified from available evidence of effectiveness. The manual is available on CD and at www.aghealth.org.au/pressures.

**Lead Action: Australian Centre for
Agricultural Health and Safety**

4. Access to Rural Financial Counsellors

Rural Financial Counsellors have been demonstrated to play a key role for farmers who need assistance in the organising their financial affairs, particularly those businesses that may be failing. In addition, these services have become key sources of information regarding available support and other sources of financial and counselling assistance in the communities they serve. The services would be enhanced by co-location of social workers with financial counsellors. The network will advocate for the maintenance and enhancement of these services in forms that meet the needs of farmers, thereby enhancing mental health and wellbeing.

**Lead Action: NSW Farmers Association
NSW Association of Rural Financial Counsellor Groups**

Planned Programs on Pathways to Health (cont'd)

5. Access to Drought Support Workers

Drought support workers administered through the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) can provide effective assistance during severe drought. Linkage of these services with the range of available services in the Network will enhance their effectiveness in improving mental health and wellbeing of people in the farming sector.

Lead Action: NSW Department of Primary Industries

6. Access to Welfare Programs

The Network recognises the vital role played by welfare agencies in helping to reduce intolerable stress during times of hardship. These include Anglicare, the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and the Smith Family to name a few. Other agencies in the network can work more closely with these agencies, and agencies such as the Country Women's Association can play effective roles in coordination of welfare effort.

**Lead Action: Anglicare
Centrelink
Country Women's Association of NSW
MacKillop Family Services
Presentation Sisters Rural Outreach Service
St Vincent de Paul Society
The Salvation Army
Wesley Mission/LifeForce**

7. Practical Assistance to Farmers to Comply with Regulatory Requirements

The Network can play an active role in reducing the pressure on farmers and farm businesses by further development and provision of practical methods, tools and education for farmers to comply with government regulatory requirements. On-farm resources for occupational health and safety have been developed by Farmsafe Australia and are available at www.farmsafe.org.au. Farm safety training (the Managing Farm Safety™ course) is available by contacting aghealth@health.usyd.edu.au. Chemcert Training courses are available to comply with the Pesticides Act requirements. Smartrain courses providing similar training under the TAFE system are also available.

**Lead Action: NSW Farmers Association
Chemcert
Department of Primary Industries
Farmsafe Australia
TAFE**

8. Change Management Skills Development

This is an area that needs attention, as there is much evidence of farmers having difficulty with the pace of change, the nature of change and of keeping up with the demands on farm businesses. NSW Farmers Association and other Network participants should actively consider how farmers can be helped to develop such skills, and thereby assist in improving mental health and wellbeing. For example, the Australian Government's *FarmHelp* program is based on change and could provide an opportunity to fund change management and welfare income support for people facing tough decisions. The dairy change management model may also warrant consideration for potential broader application.

Lead action: To be considered further

Planned Programs on Pathways to Health (cont'd)

9. Local Community-Building Programs, Building Social Network and Opportunities

A wide range of activities have been undertaken that are based in local communities, serving a range of identified needs. These include services aimed at visiting all farms, men's health programs and events that provide opportunity for local social interaction. There is a need to:

- Map what is happening regionally and locally, eg Drought Support Worker initiatives; where there are gaps in the programs; and how communities cope with change;
- Raise the profile of programs that are working well eg Anglicare and CWA connections; and
- Provide a 'one stop shop' (perhaps via a website) to identify existing programs, particularly for each region. Centrelink might play this role and be a major supporter eg *Community Connect*, and Lifeline's *Just Look* aims to provide a similar service.

**Lead Action: Margaret Alston (Working Group Convenor)
Centre for Rural Social Research, CSU
Country Women's Association of NSW**

10. Professional Network Building - *Farming Insights* project

NSW Farmers Association is a key partner, with the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety in the *Farming Insights* project – a project aimed at preventing suicide by addressing issues of social and professional isolation in male farmers aged 25-45 years. Outcomes to date include the agreement that the Association will be host to a network of *professional* farmers, who are committed to the industry for the future and who wish to be linked into such a network. The network will provide access to relevant farm business management information and local social opportunity through Regional Service Manager networks. Regional groups that provide similar support such as Farm Management 500, and Young Guns in Wool are not accessible state-wide, and these have indicated a desire to be linked into a statewide network. Likewise, the R&D Corporations, governments and tertiary institutions have indicated support for such a network.

**Lead Action: Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety
NSW Farmers Association
Anglicare**

11. Building Positive View of Farming From a City Perspective

A poor public image of farming has contributed to the poor morale of many farmers in NSW. NSW Farmers Association could play a key role in sponsoring a campaign to both raise the positive profile of farmers and to raise the morale of farmers. This may involve the development of a positive NSW farm sector 'charter' (with bipartisan support) that recognises the positive contribution of the farm sector to NSW, as well as careful use of media and other agencies. This action could play an important role in reducing feelings of worthlessness and despair, thereby improving the mental health and wellbeing of farmers.

Lead Action: NSW Farmers Association

Planned Programs on Pathways to Health (cont'd)

12. *Farm Pride* campaign

Linked to the above, NSW Farmers Association could play a key role in sponsoring a *Farm Pride* campaign targeted to farmers themselves aiming raise the positive self-image of farming.

Lead Action: NSW Farmers Association

13. Improved Access to drug and Alcohol Programs and Services

Drug and alcohol services can provide both prevention and care services. There is a perceived gap in drug and alcohol services, particularly in rural areas (early identification; recognition; services to assist). The Network should include drug and alcohol service providers to develop relevant services and resources for the farm sector, and to ensure that treatment services are accessible and effective.

**Lead Action: TBA
NSW Health Department Centre for Drug and Alcohol**

14. *Mental Health First Aid* Training

Mental Health First Aid training is a program developed by the Australian National University. It provides participants with the knowledge and skills to recognize mental health problems in themselves and others and where to access relevant services. The Network can assist in delivery of this program to the farming sector by support at state level and assistance at local level to ensuring participation. Other means of communication of information should be explored, and might include getting good mental health information out through the Rural Report on ABC radio. For example 5 minutes of top mental health information followed by local contact details, mixing mix high profile and local speakers.

**Lead Action: Brian Kelly (Working Group Convenor)
Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health
Centre for Mental Health Research, ANU**

15. Reducing the Stigma Associated with Mental Disorder

People with mental disorder, including those with depression, report difficulty in dealing with the stigma associated with having a mental illness or disorder. This is magnified if treatment is needed in a psychiatric hospital. The Network should consider what role it can play in addressing this problem in rural communities.

Lead Action: Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health

16. Improved Access to Effective Mental Health Solutions

The Network is aware of a range of resources that can help individual to work through mental health and stress problems. A number of these are available on the web. These need to be identified and those that have been proved to be effective should be accessible to farming people. *MulgaNet* is a virtual network for information and resource sharing for rural mental health clinicians in Australia.

**Lead Action: Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health
Beyondblue
Black Dog Institute**

Planned Programs on Pathways to Health (cont'd)

17. Improved Access to Effective Mental Health Services

People with clinical depression and other mental illness require professional care and sometimes specialised facilities. Mental Health services in NSW have been under pressure from lack of professional staff and facilities. While mental health is currently a priority of NSW Health for improvement, the Network can play a key role by working with NSW Health in advocating for improved services in rural NSW and services that are relevant to remote farming families. Action that is needed includes:

- Mapping what is available in terms of advisory services and clinical services, and coordinating activity – including Beyond Blue, Black Dog, ANU services, Lifeline);
- Linking of networks, and the Network, with the health services; and
- Skilling of the workforce at all levels, including the 'accidental counsellors'.

Support is also needed for Support Workers, particularly in remote rural communities where peer support is not available.

Lead Action: Brian Kelly (Working Group Convenor)
Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health
Beyondblue
Black Dog Institute

18. Improved Access to Counselling Services

Where families and individuals are not coping or are in crisis, but not experiencing clinical illness, counselling services are often required to prevent further deterioration.

Counselling services are not readily available across rural NSW. The Network can liaise with current service providers, advocate for maintenance and possible extension of such services and ensure farmers are aware of their existence and promote their use where appropriate. The needs of the full age spectrum, ie children through to elderly should be provided for.

Lead Action: TBA

19. Access to Crisis Line/s

People in crisis, including when in despair and seeing no way out, can be helped by having someone immediately available to speak to. NSW Health has established the **Rural Support Line** (1800 201 123). The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety, Rural Financial Counseling Services and NSW DPI have provided introductory training for the counselors, and are working to ensure that the service is relevant and accessible. Other Crisis Lines are accessible, including Lifeline, Drought Support Line etc. There appears to be some confusion about which line is most appropriate to call, each line offers somewhat different service and approach. A task to be undertaken by the Network is to identify all relevant Crisis Lines and define their role and type of service provided, in order for the Network to provide appropriate support and publicity to the services on offer to farming people.

Lead action: Graeme James (Working Group Convenor)
Rural Support Line
Lifeline
Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health

Planned Programs on Pathways to Health (cont'd)

20. Mental Health First Aid in Relation to Access to Firearms

See (14) above. One key factor for successful suicide among farmers is their access to firearms. Potential victims and their families need help to gain early insight into the possibility of firearms being used for self harm. The *Mental Health First Aid* course would be useful in this regard, and support by NSW Farmers Association would assist in promoting farmer and farmer support service participation.

***Lead Action: Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health
NSW Farmers Association***

21. Access to Debriefing and Counselling Services in Event of Farm Suicide

This is an area of key need in rural communities. Suicide is traumatic for families and friends, with feelings of guilt, anger, sadness mixed with the practical problems associated with a sudden death and public coronial inquiry. The Network can assist rural communities to define service requirements and availability, and to develop its appropriate response to reports of suicide in the interests of reducing the impact and potential for further suicide.

Lead action: Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health

22. The Media Role in Farm Suicide Prevention

The media is a useful vehicle for communication of helpful information, and should be used well by the Network. However, the media can be either harmful or helpful in its coverage of suicide. A Code of Conduct for the media is available for reporting of suicide events to ensure that reporting does not develop the attitude in a community that suicide is a 'normal' or 'honourable' action in time of overwhelming difficulty. A Communication Plan should be developed with agreed messages, target audience and methods for the work of the Network. The media networks of all Network partners should be used for such communication.

***Lead action: NSW Farmers Association
Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety***