

Rural Mental Health Network

27 February 2006 Meeting Update

Regional Snapshot

- Despite replenishing rainfall events across some regions of NSW in the last six months, much of the state remains drought-affected, extending the financial and emotional impacts of the current drought for many farm families.
 - 32% of the state is currently 'in drought'
 - 27.5% of the state is 'marginal'
 - 40.5% of the state is 'satisfactory'
- Bushfires throughout the 2005/06 summer have had a major impact on rural communities. However, these shocking events have also highlighted the resilience and generosity of rural communities, with fodder and cash donations flowing in from all corners of the state, on top of personal support from Rural Financial Counsellors, Drought Support Workers and the like.

Ongoing Challenges

- The Network continues to be extremely concerned about the shortage of mental health support services across the state, with attraction and retention of health professionals; child psychiatrist shortages; and lack of support for carers highlighted as particular areas of concern at present.
- The Network reported that business and personal resilience appears to be decreasing for people in some regions, reflecting the combined effect of natural disasters (eg droughts, floods and bushfires) and low commodity prices.
- With Exceptional Circumstances (EC) drought support due to expire across much of the state over the coming months, the Network is keen to ensure that support services are available to assist farm families through this challenging transition period.
- Funding uncertainties for Rural Financial Counsellors and Drought Support Workers are of extreme concern to the Network. The Network has called for ongoing funding support for these essential support services.

Key Areas of Activity

- [Mental Health First Aid](#) training is continuing to be rolled out across the state, with growing demands for the course from support services, schools and farmers.
- Centrelink is currently conducting hundreds of phonecalls to farmers where drought assistance is ending to advise them of other types of support that are available
- The findings of *The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia's rural and remote areas*, which Network participant [Professor Margaret Alston](#) was a co-author or, are currently being considered by the Network.
- Rotary is hosting a number of meetings across the state over the coming weeks with a focus on increasing mental health awareness within rural communities. The NSW Farmers Association President has also been involved in a number of these meetings.
- The Hunter/New England Area Health Service has established a mental health network within the region, appointing a drought liaison mental health worker.
- The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety's *Managing the Pressures of Farming* resource has been re-printed, with an additional 5000 CDs now available.

Blueprint Update

- Network participants are continuing to implement the key actions outlined in the *NSW Farmers Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on NSW Farms*. The blueprint is now available [online](#).

Upcoming Meetings/Events

- The Rural Mental Health Network will be officially launched by the Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health), the Hon Cherie Burton and NSW Farmers Association President Jock Laurie in April 2006
- The Rural Mental Health Network will next meet in May 2006

