

# Rural Mental Health Network History and Overview

## The Problem

The severe and in many cases ongoing drought has highlighted a range of problems with the current mental health conditions and services across rural and remote NSW. The NSW Farmers Association Drought Summit held in Parkes in May 2005 exposed the significant and widespread emotional impacts of drought, with keynote speaker Jeff Kennett (Chairman, *beyondblue*) urging the 2000 farmers in attendance to speak openly about the stresses of drought. The willingness of farmers to stand up in this very public form and discuss their fears and anxieties about the personal, family and business impacts of drought marked somewhat of a turning point for rural communities in terms of acknowledging and seeking to address the growing problem of mental illness.

The emotional stress from the lingering drought is impacting not only farmers, but also their families, communities and even the drought support services themselves. Whilst the drought may have a limited life span, its ramifications such as depression, financial hardship, and loss will continue for many years.

But even in times outside of drought, farmers' stress levels are rising, due to the changing nature of farming (eg globalisation, restructuring, the ageing farmer population) and the prevalence of increasingly restrictive legislation affecting day-to-day farming activities (particularly native vegetation and Occupational Health and Safety).

Deaths from suicide of male farmers and farm workers are approximately double that of the Australian male population. There are also a significantly higher number of 'accidents' (eg death by firearm, car accidents) occurring in the bush, particularly in remote areas. Despite the disproportionately high levels of depression and other mental illnesses in rural and remote areas, communities in these areas continue to have poorer access to mental health support – a problem that must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

## Finding Solutions

As part of a wider response to this worrying problem, NSW Farmers Association brought together a group of key stakeholders in the area of rural mental health, to discuss how best to work together to address rural and remote mental health issues. This forum, held in June 2005, resulted in the creation of a formal Rural Mental Health Network and a *NSW Farmers Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on NSW Farms*.

The Blueprint is a simplified summary of key issues that need to be addressed and the major actions that will be taken to be effective in addressing the Network's identified rural mental health priorities. Each Network participant plays a different but connected role in addressing these priorities.

The Network has grown considerably since its inception, with 19 organisations now represented, including

- charitable organisations (eg St Vincent de Paul, Anglicare, Salvos etc)
- support and research organisations (eg *beyondblue*, Black Dog Institute, Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, Australian Rotary Health Research Fund etc)
- Government Agencies (eg DPI, Centrelink); and
- other associations (eg CWA, Rural Doctors Association).

The Network meets quarterly to discuss collaborative actions as outlined in the Blueprint, as well as a range of policy issues associated with rural mental health, including lobbying for improved resources for rural mental health in NSW.

Network meetings also provide an opportunity to get a snapshot of regional conditions from the perspective of farmers, rural communities, support workers, small business etc. For example, at the February 2006 meeting, the Network heard that bushfires as well as drought had a major impact on rural communities over the summer. However, these shocking events 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.



## Rural Mental Health Network History and Overview (cont'd)

### Priorities

The Network has identified a range of ongoing challenges that require collaboration in order to resolve:

- The Network is 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;
- 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 and the Network has called on the Premier to provide ongoing funding support for these essential support services.

Whilst these are serious challenges, the Network is focusing on solutions:

- The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health and the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety are successfully rolling out a number of key programs such as Mental Health First Aid training, mental health workshops and the interactive *Managing the Pressures of Farming* website.
  - Mental Health First Aid training is continuing to be rolled out across the state, with growing demands for the course from support services, farmers, and interestingly – schools.
- As part of its Pre-Budget Submission, NSW Farmers Association called on the NSW Government to invest at least \$100 000 per annum in mental health services through improved availability of Mental Health First Aid training across NSW.
- 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.
- Centrelink is currently conducting thousands of phonecalls to farmers where drought assistance is ending to advise them of other types of support that are available so that they are better prepared for the phase-out of assistance.
- The Hunter New England Mental Health Service has established Rural Support Services Networks in the New England and Upper Hunter regions involving representatives from the farming community and key rural services and groups. The Service has already hosted two *Farmers Mental Health and Wellbeing* seminars and a Mental Health First Aid course.
- One of the Network's newest members – the Suicide Safety Network – has recently received Federal Government approval to set up a network in Tamworth, building on the success of the Suicide Safety Network established in Port Macquarie last year.

### The Future

It appears that the NSW Farmers Rural Mental Health Network is the first of its kind in the country. The types of activities being undertaken by the Network have tremendous capacity to reduce the stigma of mental health problems in our rural community; help people find the support they need; and reduce the impact of mental health problems by advocating earlier intervention. It is hoped that other states will adopt similar approaches once they see how much can be achieved by working together.

### Further Information

If you wish to join the NSW Farmers Rural Mental Health Network or require further information, please contact NSW Farmers Association on 1300 794 000, (02) 8251 1700 or [emailus@nswfarmers.org.au](mailto:emailus@nswfarmers.org.au).

