



Foreword

A message from
the Norco CEO

Farming's
Silent Crisis

1. Mental health issues
on the rise: key findings

2. Under pressure &
under-valued: what's
troubling our farmers

3. Breaking down the
barriers to support

4. Taking action:
recommendations
to combat the crisis

NATIONAL FARMER wellbeing

REPORT • 2023



National
Farmers
Federation



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FOREWORD

As president of the National Farmers' Federation, I know all too well the pressures that life on the land can place on farmers and their families.

I've seen in my own community the impact that pressures like drought, natural disasters, financial pressures and isolation can have on farmers' wellbeing. The nature of our work and where we live means accessing the support we need can be challenging. You have to be tough to make a living on the land, but that culture of being tough can also present a barrier to getting help when it's needed. I want to help change that culture in our industry and make it okay to speak up when you're not okay.

There's no doubt this report will make for uncomfortable reading, but sometimes that's what is needed to prompt real action. At the NFF, our 2030 Roadmap includes a target to close the gap in farmer wellbeing - but we can't do it alone. It's important that we elevate these issues on the national stage and draw attention to ways that industry, government and the community can support

farmers. Currently, we know that farmers experience worse mental and physical health outcomes compared to everyday Australians. That doesn't need to be the case, and getting action on this starts with having the data to articulate the problem.

There is certainly a role for governments here, to continue investing in frontline services in rural communities to bring help closer to those who need it. But we also have to take responsibility ourselves, and that means each organisation and individual doing their small part to reduce stigma, support people who are experiencing challenges, and direct people to available help and support.

These findings should be a wake-up call to everyone who supports farmers - from government to service providers, right through to our end customers. We need to reflect on ways to improve this situation as a matter of urgency - and show farmers that they're not alone.

Fiona Simson

President, National Farmers' Federation



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A MESSAGE FROM THE NORCO CEO

At Norco, our farmers and our people have been through an incredibly tough 12 months. The flood events of February/March 2022 and the ensuing prolonged wet weather really took its toll on many people. What was interesting was that the underlying reality of farmer wellbeing was not surfacing as strongly as it did in the past.

As the year progressed and other parts of the country started to have similar challenges, we again saw that farmers, who bear a significant brunt of natural disasters, were impacted heavily with livestock, crops and their general livelihoods being destroyed by these challenging events.

Farmers are the most resilient people that I have met. They are strong, courageous and adapt to changing circumstances of the time. With the droughts, then fires and then floods, farmers have had to invest not only financial capital to keep going, but also emotional capital, which makes things even more challenging for them and their families.

The decision to conduct this national research piece was important, as we wanted to give all farmers a voice and an opportunity to join the discussion. What this report shows is that a lot more intervention and support is needed to address the current mental health stress within the Australian farming community. Clearly, people are really struggling.

As a 100% farmer-owned co-operative, Norco's mission, and indeed my own personal mission, is to ensure that we are improving the lives of our farmers, our people and our community. We do the best we can, within our means, to bring this mission alive. Driving this important and difficult conversation is another important way in which we seek to do just that.

Michael Hampson
Chief Executive Officer, Norco





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FARMING'S SILENT CRISIS

It's no secret that Australian farmers have been doing it tough. Natural disasters, rising inflation and global competition, not to mention the physical and emotional demands of running a farm, are among some of the more well-documented challenges faced by our farming communities.

What has yet to become part of the national conversation, however, is how issues such as these impact farmers' mental health and wellbeing. Recent studies have shown the average suicide rate in Australian farmers to be almost 59% higher than the general population¹ - the equivalent of 1 farmer taking their own life every 10 days.

Of course, these figures represent only those cases which end in tragedy; little is understood about the full spectrum of mental health issues within farming communities, where limited access to mental health support is coupled with a reluctance to ask for help. The prospect that this is just the tip of the iceberg is a very real one, suggesting that we are in the midst of a mental health crisis which requires urgent attention.

¹ National Rural Health Alliance. Farmer Suicides
- Exploring Ten Years of Coronial Data (2009-2018)

This report seeks to:

- 1 Identify the scale and key contributing factors impacting farmers' mental health
- 2 Explore the nature of farmers' mental health issues.
- 3 Put forward recommendations designed to not only improve mental health support for farmers but also tackle the root causes

The research was commissioned by Norco, in partnership with the National Farmers' Federation, and with additional input from the Black Dog Institute.



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1. MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ON THE RISE: KEY FINDINGS

While poor mental health among farmers isn't a completely new phenomenon, our findings suggest mental ill health may be becoming more widespread.

More than half of Australian farmers (51%) agree that mental health is a problem or concern in their local community, while close to a third (30%) report declining mental health over the last few years.

Among survey respondents, burnout and exhaustion is the most commonly reported issue, with almost three quarters of farmers reporting having experienced burnout of some kind in the last five years. Meanwhile, 64% of farmers say they have experienced anxiety and 45% have had bouts of depression in the past few years; for one in seven (14%) anxiety is a worryingly frequent occurrence.

1.1 Aussie lives at risk

In line with other research on the topic, self-harm and suicide continue to be the greatest concern for farmers and their friends and families. Close to half of Aussie farmers (45%) have had thoughts of self-harm or suicide, while close to a third (30%) have actually attempted to harm themselves or take their own lives.

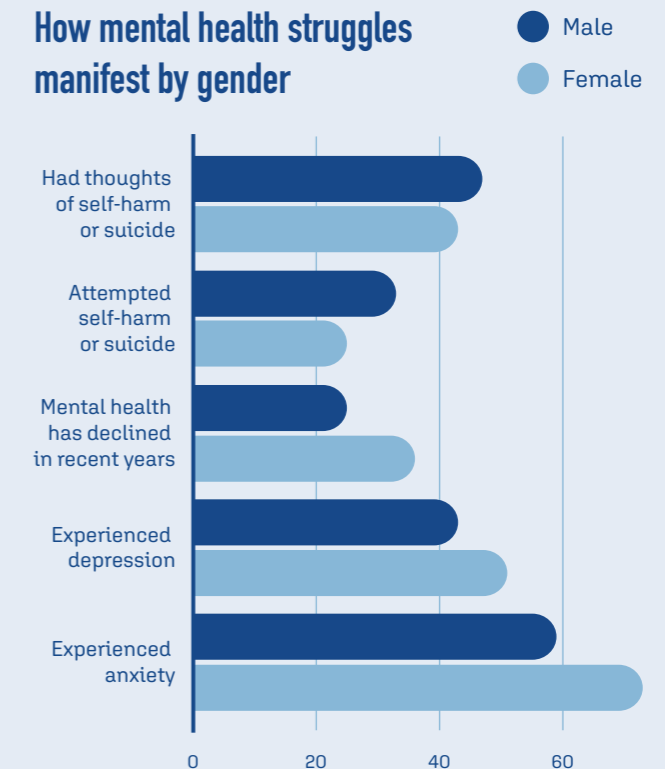
Furthermore, it's a topic that's familiar to many: a quarter of those surveyed know of a fellow farmer who has had thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Tragically, a third (34%) know a fellow farmer who has taken their own life.

1.2 The gender divide

The way in which farmers' mental health struggles manifest themselves appears to vary noticeably according to gender. Women tend to report to depression and anxiety in greater numbers, while men pose a greater risk when it comes to self-harm or suicide.

According to Chief Scientist at the Black Dog Institute, Samuel Harvey, the gender differences revealed by the survey are consistent with the general population: "This trend of women being more likely to report depression and anxiety symptoms, but men being more likely to die by suicide is something that we've seen consistently for many years. This is partly because women tend to find it easier to reach out and get help for their symptoms, but it is also just because of the different actions men and women take should they experience suicidal thoughts. There's some evidence that these gender differences are even more prominent amongst regional communities."

How mental health struggles manifest by gender





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1.3 The generational gap

Another compelling discovery has been the way in which different generations deal with the stresses of farming. The baby boomer generation has experienced the biggest decline in mental health over the past few years, with approximately 40% of those aged 45-64 reporting a downward trajectory.

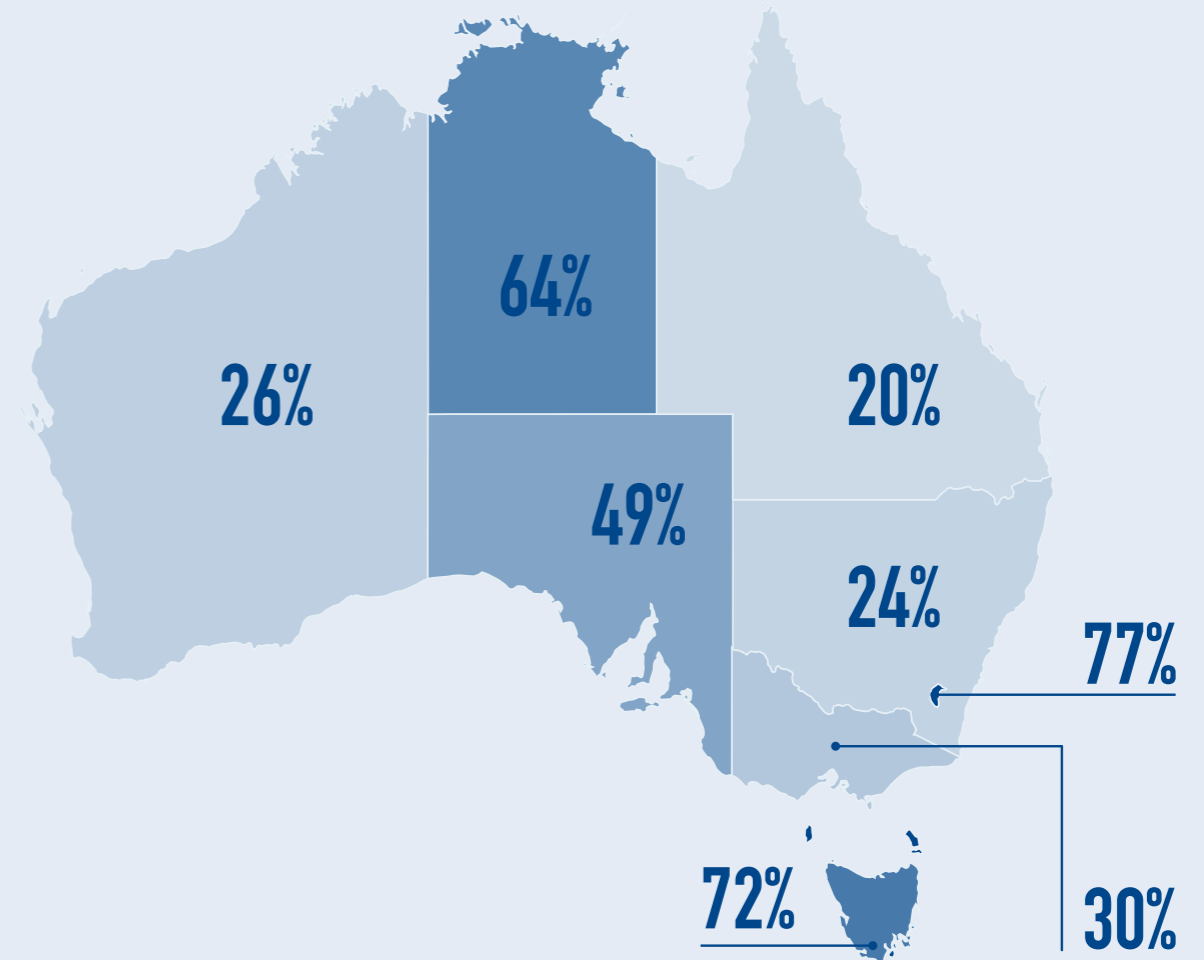
But despite appearing to have the best mental wellbeing, the younger age groups (18-34) are most at risk when it comes to self-harm and suicide. 75% of those aged 18-24 have had suicidal thoughts at some point in their life, while a shocking 84% of 25-34 have had thoughts of self-harm and suicide at some point in their life. Close to half experience these thoughts with relative frequency – significantly higher than the national average.

While the data and incidence of these thought patterns then declines considerably with age, it does point to a worrying trend among younger farmers struggling to deal with the mounting pressures of their job.

Close to half of Aussie farmers have had thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Thoughts of self-harm and suicide across Australia

States with <100 respondents: NT, SA, WA, TAS





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2. UNDER PRESSURE & UNDER-VALUED: WHAT'S TROUBLING OUR FARMERS

So what's behind these statistics? Unsurprisingly, weather (incorporating natural disasters) was the top answer farmers gave (47%) when asked what triggered their mental health issues. Rounding out the top three was financial stress (36%) closely followed by inflation and cost pressures (35%).

Looking beyond these external macro factors, however, we begin to see a more complex issue emerge. More than a quarter of Australian farmers (27%) say that feelings of loneliness or isolation, combined with limited access to mental health services, have had the biggest impact on their mental health over the past five years.

In addition, more than three quarters (76%) of farmers surveyed believe that the role they play is undervalued by the Australian public. This suggests that many farmers may be experiencing a diminished sense of self-worth - in itself a common trigger for depression.

2.1 Pushed to extremes

It's impossible to understate the impact of extreme weather events on farming communities. Recent years have proven that Australia is increasingly prone to drought, flood and fires, all of which can and do have devastating effects on farmers' livelihoods - and, consequently, their mental wellbeing.

Our research reaffirms this sobering fact: 88% of farmers surveyed said their farming operations had been adversely affected by weather events over the past five years, with an average cost of \$1.4 million per farm.

Furthermore, one in five Aussie farmers (20%) report feeling defeated and wanting to give up following a natural disaster while nearly one in ten (9%) said they felt disconnected and isolated from their local community, further fueling the emotional burden.

Another factor which may yet still come into play is the looming spectre of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) which in many cases does not fully manifest until several years after the event has occurred.

Samuel Harvey explains: "With major events like the floods and bushfires, the full mental health consequences of what people have witnessed and disorders such as PTSD often don't become apparent until one to two years after the fact. We saw this after the Black Saturday Bushfires in 2009 and we are seeing it again among those who volunteered to help during the Black Summer Bushfires in 2019/20."





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Impacts of natural disasters



\$1.4M

Average cost of natural
disasters per farm



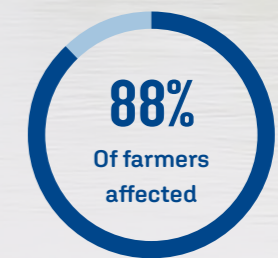
\$39B

Amount natural disasters will
cost Australia per year by 2050²



1 IN 5

Farmers want to give
up after a disaster



Top emotional challenges



² <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/technology-space/data/Our-Future-World>



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Case Study

USING FINANCIAL AID TO BOOST EMOTIONAL RECOVERY



Twelve months on from the unprecedented flooding event that devastated South East QLD and Northern NSW, dairy farmer Paul Weir is bouncing back thanks to the Norco Member Cow Financing Program.

The initiative, which enables farmer members to purchase lactating dairy cattle to boost milk production on farm, aims to address both the industry-wide decline in milk supply and the financial conundrum that many farmers faced post the floods.

Like most farmers in the region, Weir was heavily impacted by last year's floods, but says the cow buy back scheme was pivotal

in his decision to remain in the industry and recover quickly.

"During the floods I sadly lost a herd of 130, but with Norco's finance program I was able to purchase 93 new animals which allowed us to make a comeback quicker than expected. We are now producing up to an additional 1,800 litres of milk per day which is a brilliant outcome," he says.

"Without this program, I'm not sure where we would be in terms of supply and commercial output. We certainly appreciate the support from the Co-operative which has not only helped me and my family, but other farmers as well," Weir concludes.



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2.2 An uncertain future

The future of farming - both at an industry and an individual level - is another topic that weighs heavily on the minds of many farmers, contributing to the overall mental health struggles they face.

Two in five farmers (40%) have contemplated leaving the industry, citing not only the physical, emotional and financial pressures, but also the perception that farming is no longer valued in Australia as key reasons.

What's more, a quarter of Aussie farming families (24%) report being in their 'final generation' as they either don't want their children to take over the farm, or their children don't wish to follow in their footsteps.

Key reasons include the pressures and uncertainties of farming being too great (29%), the financial rewards being insufficient (24%), or their children pursuing alternate professions (24%).

While in support of their children's decisions, more than a quarter (28%) report feeling 'sad' and even 'devastated' by the prospect of the family business not continuing.

These feelings of disappointment, disillusionment and uncertainty, coupled with the afore-mentioned belief that farmers are no longer valued by the wider community, paint a compelling picture of a profession that has lost much of its spirit and self-belief.

Norco CEO Michael Hampson comments: "Most people, like our farmers, need a pathway to a brighter future to hold onto and need to feel valued. When I was young, my father used to tell me: "This country is built on the backs of our farmers. If our farmers do well, then we all do well." We need to make farmers feel valued again."

We need to make farmers feel valued again.





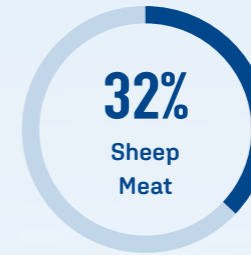
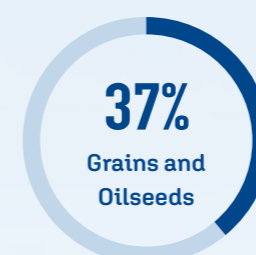
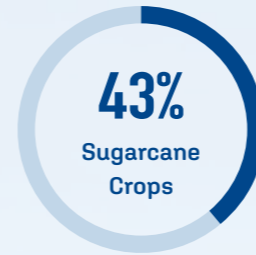
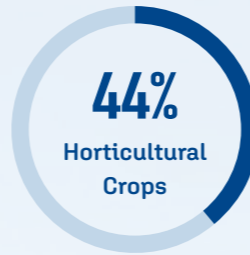
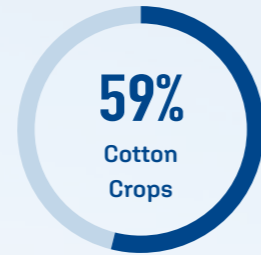
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Sectors reporting highest declines in mental health





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3. BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

Access to mental health support has long been a challenge for rural communities. But since the advent of COVID-19, demand for mental health services has spiked nationwide, resulting in ever growing waiting lists and practices being unable to cope with the demand. In rural and regional Australia, where mental health practitioners are few and far between, the situation is much worse³.

It's not surprising, then, to learn that close to one in ten (8%) farmers who have suffered with mental health issues said they felt unsupported through the experience, with one in seven (15%) saying they either could not access or didn't know where to go to get help.

But access to health services is only one piece of the puzzle. Deeply-held stigmas around mental health issues are also at play, with many farmers choosing to suffer in silence rather than be candid about their feelings.

More than half (51%) of the farmers we surveyed preferred not to burden family or friends with their problems or are simply not comfortable discussing them.

For those that needed but did not seek help, close to a third (30%) experienced a continued decline in their mental health, while others became isolated and withdrew, impacting their relationships. Meanwhile, close to one in five (17%) farmers who struggled with their mental health said they did not want to seek or receive help, while one in ten (11%) felt too embarrassed to do so.

For those that did seek help, the biggest sources of support came from speaking with friends or family (34%), their GP (25%) or a fellow farmer (18%), demonstrating farmers' preference for talking to people with whom they already have an existing relationship.

David Jochinke, National Farmers' Federation Vice President, comments: "Farmers are built tough and can certainly endure a lot, but it's incredibly important that we work to normalise the issue of mental health and give our farmers both permission and a safe space to share their struggles."

We need to give our farmers a safe space to share their struggles.

³ AIHW (2022). Mental health services in Australia, COVID-19 impact on mental health - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au)



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Case Study

FARMER TO FARMER WHY IT'S GOOD TO TALK



Ross Blanch has been a dairy farmer for more than fifty years - but for close to three decades he's also been working as a Lifeline Crisis Counsellor, providing guidance and care to individuals struggling with mental health issues.

His work in this space since has seen him travel the country and provide support to those in need following natural disasters such as the equine influenza outbreak, as well as victims of cyclones and floods. Four years ago, motivated by the emotional toll the drought was having on farmers, Ross began operating a farmer-to-farmer call line, a service that was established by Lifeline Queensland.

"Farming is tough, both financially and emotionally," he says. "Farmers tend to brush off their issues and say they'll be alright - but it's extremely important that they have someone to talk to who understands and has experienced the same struggles they are."

He often speaks to farmers who feel helpless and out of options, largely due to financial challenges,

or the flood recovery process, many of whom are sadly considering suicide - but he says the work that he does helps to bring farmers to the now rather than looking back.

"I acknowledge what they've been through but help to bring them out of the past and into the present," he says. "It's a really important strategy in crisis counselling that helps them to change their thinking patterns, and after an hour and a half you can see a mentally healthier person."

"Access to support, especially from someone who understands firsthand what they're going through, can be lifesaving - and more work needs to be done to ensure our farmers right across the country feel supported, especially when times are tough."



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4. TAKING ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMBAT THE CRISIS

While some macro factors - such as the weather and the global economy - are impossible to control, our research identifies a number of mental health triggers over which we can potentially exercise some influence as well as opportunities to improve access to support.

With the endorsement of the National Farmers' Federation, Norco has developed three key recommendations aimed at galvanising action among consumers, farmers and the industry as a whole.

AUSSIE GROWN



CHECK IN



ADVOCATE





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AUSSIE GROWN

Encourage consumers to actively choose Australian farmer products.

In order to help restore much-needed pride within the farming community, more can be done by consumers to recognise and champion the critical role farmers play in our society. By doing our research and deliberately seeking out products grown by Australian farms, we're voting with our wallets and showing farmers we value the work they do.

Michael Hampson comments: "Our farmers really are the backbone of this nation and work tirelessly to deliver essential goods to feed the Australian public, so it's clear that more work needs to be done to acknowledge this and plug the appreciation gap.

"To help ensure our farmers feel valued, there's really no better place to start than by making sure that we, as Australians, choose Aussie farmer products over foreign companies and imported products," he says. "This is a simple, first step that Australian consumers can get behind."

Consumers are encouraged to look for the Australian Made, Australian Grown (AMAG) logo on products before purchasing. A full list of genuine Aussie products can be found at australianmade.com.au.





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CHECK IN

Call on farmers to “check in on a mate”.

Both anecdotal research and the findings of this report indicate that farmers respond best to other farmers, who are uniquely placed to understand the challenges they're facing. In rural communities where loneliness and social isolation is rife, it's never been more important for farmers to stay connected to one another. Whether by attending community events together, dropping in to help out with some farm work or even just picking up the phone, it's important to maintain those social connections during tough times.

Farmer and counsellor Ross Blanch explains: “Once upon a time I would see lots of farmers at community events, but that's really depleted over time. Getting farmers off farm is a really tough thing to do, because there's so much work to do. But I think there's a general consensus here around the need for more community and connection.”

As well as encouraging farmers to “check in on a mate”, Norco is launching a series of Farmer Wellbeing Roadshows in select regional locations and is calling on farmers to attend and bring their fellow farmers along. The Roadshows will include community information and education nights across its AgriSolutions network to promote farmers' financial, physical and mental wellbeing and provide access to a range of tools and resources.





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ADVOCATE

An industry-wide push to create a 'Farmer's Army' of mental health advocates.

Norco is also calling on the farming industry to follow their lead by investing in mental health training for their workers. For Norco, this includes offering Lifeline Crisis Supporter Training to all field officers, select co-op farmer members, the senior executive team and Board of Directors, so that they have the right tools and can develop the skills to identify and provide support to farmers who may be struggling.

Michael Hampson explains: "When it comes to the issue of mental health, we know that farmer-to-farmer support is key. To help build these support networks, Norco is committing to creating mental health champions in and around our organisation.

"But we also know that the issue is far bigger than just our farming communities alone. It really requires an industry-wide approach to ensure that farmers across the country have access to the support and services they require."





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INCREASE FUNDING

In addition to Norco's recommendations, the National Farmers' Federation is calling on all levels of government to urgently assess the resourcing they provide to farming communities to support wellbeing and mental health.

One in seven farmers (15%) report difficulty accessing suitable services in their community; this disconnect between available support and farmers in need must be closed in order to achieve the industry's goal of eliminating the gap in farmer wellbeing by 2030.

National Farmers' Federation President Fiona Simson explains that clearly, the unique needs of the farming community are not being met by existing services:

"We know that the challenges farmers face differ from those in metropolitan Australia or larger regional centres. They need support from services that speak their language, and understand the pressures they face."

"We need dedicated resourcing to tackle farmers' mental health challenges, and that needs to come from each level of government with leadership from the Commonwealth."

Getting this approach right and finding the appropriate resourcing will take time. The National Farmers' Federation is committed to working constructively with governments to develop fit-for-purpose solutions that will have a lasting impact on farmer wellbeing.





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IF YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW NEEDS HELP



Lifeline

13 11 14



Beyond Blue

1300 224 636



Headspace

1800 650 890



Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467



ReachOut

au.reachout.com



MensLine Australia

1300 789 978
