Mental Health in Rural Australia: Understanding climate change and drought policy impacts

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Based on the paper forthcoming paper
Farmers’ mental health and climate change – a review of the science
And comments from Dr Jennifer Bowers
The drought is not over

• In February
  • 44% of New South Wales
  • 95% of Victoria and South Australia
  • remained in drought

• Over time, disasters like drought will impact on the social and economic base on which farming communities depend

• Drought is recognised as a disproportionate and general stressor
And the Minister said:

• I am not surprised by a whole lot of mental health problems we have in this sector
• I am not surprised at the number of times when I go into a town people talk about the latest act of self-harm that very frequently it was somebody who was getting significant amounts of Government support
• We need some really strong transitional mechanisms as we move to the new drought policy
  • Hon Tony Burke
  • ABARE Conference 2 March 2010
DAFF Drought policy

- Farm grants
  - climate impacts

- Farm Planning

- Rural communities programs

- Farm family support

- Farm exit support

- Farm social support

- Beyond farming

Funding locally based
Pilot aims to test reform measures

- Support farmers in managing and preparing for future drought and a changing climate
- Increase the resilience and capacity of rural communities to cope with adversity
- Better coordinate social support services in rural areas
- Help families meet immediate basic household expenses during financial hardship
- Connect current farmers and former farmers to discuss opportunities outside of farming.
Better coordinate social support services

• Develop or enhance social and community services
• Facilitate the development of new or existing community networks
• Increase the decision making and planning capacity of community organisations to manage the impacts of hardship on their activities
• Improve facilities and infrastructure that will build the social capital of the community
• Support community events aimed at increasing social ties and community participation.
And the community said:

- The number of suicides and relationship breakdowns in farming communities well exceeds the national average.
- In the face of climate change, removal of EC, and the removal of Community Support Workers there must be some avenue of coordinating/administering the transition to the new policy
  - Dr Jennifer Bowers
  - Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health
  - Queensland 11 May 2010
The group most at risk

• 20% of Australian farmers are quite affected by drought
• They report:
  • most have farm risk levels
  • the lowest incomes
  • poorer health
  • isolated from information services
  • have most problems accessing support services
  • uncertain about how they should adapt
DAFF Drought policy

DoHA Community support workers

Academic research

State & Community based ‘rural’ mental health services

No profile of mental health needs

Not mental health services

DAFF $ Problem With EC

Problem With EC

FAHCSIA

$ Who’s talking to whom?

And who’s talking with farmers?
Key questions

• Where is the definition of need?
• Where is the program logic that connects drought policy with mental health needs of farmers
  • Where is coordination mechanism?
How do we get a coordinated outcome?

- DAFF Drought Programs
- FaHCSIA
- DoHA Community support workers
- Coordination vs Duplication Missed need
- DPI style program
- State & Community based ‘rural’ mental health services
- Academic research
- Landcare NRM groups

Issues: Policy framework vs logistics