



Mental Health and Wellbeing in Agriculture Policy Statement

Background

Farmers die of suicide at twice the rate of other working Australians. This equates to one farmer taking their own life every 10 days. This inarguably constitutes a crisis.

Farmers are also half as likely to have seen a mental health professional in the past 12 months, compared to other rural people. Research has consistently shown that farmers will only access mental health-related help if they feel that the person offering support understands their way of life.

The *National Farmer Wellbeing Report*, delivered in partnership between dairy cooperative Norco and the NFF, found close to half of Australian farmers (45%) have had thoughts of self-harm or suicide, while 30% have actually attempted to harm themselves or take their own lives. In terms of causes, the Report confirmed the weather, including natural disasters, was a lead contributor to mental health issues, followed by financial stress. Other exacerbating factors include fatigue arising from the physical demands of primary production and stress of managing chronic illness.

Beyond being an obvious and essential input to improved overall quality of life for individuals, families, and communities, mental health and wellbeing in agricultural industries is key to unlocking improved farm productivity. Individuals receiving proper mental health support often experience increased focus, motivation, and efficiency, leading to higher productivity levels in both personal and professional spheres.

Policy principles

The following set of policy principles are to both inform NFF activities and priorities, and also to influence the policy design and development processes of government and other stakeholders:

About the nature of mental health services:

- **Accessibility:** Ensure equitable access to mental health services for rural communities, reducing geographic, economic, and cultural barriers. Develop strategies such as telehealth, mobile clinics, and outreach programs to improve access to mental health care.
- **Tailored Services:** Tailor mental health services to meet the specific needs of the farming community. Promote awareness and sensitivity among mental health professionals and ensure the availability of tailored services and supports.

- **Community Engagement:** Involve rural communities in policy development, planning, and implementation processes. Recognise the unique needs and strengths of rural communities and actively engage community members, including mental health consumers, families, and local leaders, to ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives are considered.
- **Integrated Approach:** Promote an integrated approach to mental health care by fostering collaboration and coordination among different stakeholders, including healthcare providers, community organisations, government agencies, and local communities. This approach should encompass prevention, early intervention, treatment, and ongoing support.
- **Continuity:** Prioritise the continuity of care by qualified professionals in rural communities, to improve outcomes by reducing stigma, building trust and rapport, enabling early intervention and a holistic and local approach to care.
- **Prevention and Early Intervention:** Prioritise prevention and early intervention strategies to address mental health issues before they escalate. Focus on community-based programs that promote mental well-being, build resilience, and provide early identification and intervention for individuals at risk.

About the resources to support mental health services:

- **Workforce Development:** Invest in the recruitment, training, and retention of mental health professionals in rural areas. Offer incentives such as scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, and professional development opportunities to attract and retain a skilled and diverse mental health workforce in rural communities.
- **Technology and Innovation:** Leverage technology and innovation to bridge the gap in mental health service provision for rural communities. Explore the use of telehealth, online platforms, mobile applications, and other digital solutions to enhance access to mental health information, resources, and support.
- **Infrastructure and Service Development:** Invest in the development and improvement of mental health infrastructure in rural areas. Ensure the availability of a comprehensive range of services, including primary care, specialised mental health services, crisis response teams, and rehabilitation programs.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Foster research and data collection efforts to better understand the mental health needs of rural communities, identify effective interventions, and monitor the impact of policies and programs. Use evidence-based approaches to inform policy development and resource allocation.
- **Industry Leadership:** Recognise the mental health and wellbeing of the agricultural community is first and foremost the responsibility of the industry itself and that further industry leadership and greater investment is required to address our most pressing and persistent challenges.

- **Sustainable Funding:** Allocate sustainable and adequate funding from government to support rural mental health initiatives. Advocate for fair and equitable distribution of resources, considering the unique challenges and higher costs associated with delivering mental health services in rural areas.

Roles and responsibilities

About the role of the NFF:

- **Advocacy:** While the NFF will not hold expertise concerning rural mental health practice, research or policy, we have a role in amplifying other voices where coherency and consistency is reached between respected experts.
- **Partnership:** The NFF will be an open and willing collaborator and partner with any organisation interested in undertaking research or policy development concerning rural mental health and wellbeing.
- **Facilitator:** As a respected node within the national agricultural network, the NFF will act as a facilitator to bring together the many disparate researchers, practitioners, advocates, and other interested parties, for the purposes of sharing knowledge, building capacity, and agreeing on shared advocacy priorities.
- **Enabling:** The NFF will support and promotes those valued mental health initiatives and services that deliver in way that is consistent with these policy principles. The NFF will focus its advocacy on initiatives that seek to build the capacity of all services, in alignment with best available science and current research.
- **Exemplar:** The NFF will aim to act as a model employer, ensuring its staff and those directly engaged by the organisation have access to appropriate resources and are generally supported in achieving positive mental health and wellbeing.

About the role of other stakeholders:

- **Chain of responsibility:** Supply chain partners, both down and upstream of agriculture, including sellers of inputs and buyers of produce, as a regular touch point for farmers and often operating within rural communities, have an important role in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing. To the extent these partners create risks to positive farmer mental health and wellbeing, they are obliged to make investments in managing the risk they create.
- **Government:** Each level of government has an important part to play in building community resilience, delivering services and funding initiatives to improve rural mental health and wellbeing. In addition, to the extent decisions of government are known to exacerbate or create risks to positive rural mental health and wellbeing, including for example making legislation that undermines access to important agricultural markets or vital inputs, they are obliged to make investments in managing the risk they create.

- **Practitioners:** There is a rich diversity of locally driven initiatives across rural communities aiming to support positive farmer mental health and wellbeing. There is a responsibility of those delivering initiatives to ensure they are grounded in evidence-based practice. There is a responsibility among the peer community of practitioners to support each other, including in designing initiatives that are evidence-based.

Adopted by NFF Members' Council on 16th of May 2024.