

Kicking the Dust



The Past, Present and Future of Young Farmers
in the Southern Mallee of South Australia

Ann Clarke & Bradley Morgan

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The Past, Present and Future of Young Farmers in the Southern Mallee Region of South Australia

Researcher Contact Details:
Ann Clarke
Email: annclar@bigpond.com

Bradley Morgan
Email: Bradley.Morgan@health.sa.gov.au

Introduction

Farming in South Australia is becoming increasingly complex. The ongoing challenges of structural adjustment, rural social and industrial change, drought, climate change and globalisation pose new and ongoing questions about what South Australian farming will look like in the future and the level of control that farmers have in shaping that future. Particularly relevant to forming a vision for this future is the small, and often unheard, population of young farmers currently pursuing a viable, sustainable and meaningful future in farming.

'Kicking the Dust' is a qualitative Public Health research project that provides insight into the Social Determinants of Health of young farmer's lives. The research investigated the meaning of farming, young farmer's perceptions of the farming industry, and highlights current issues for maintaining a viable future in farming. It is the intention of this research project to provide current information from young farmers to be used by agencies and organisations in future strategic planning and policy development. It is recognised that many of the issues identified are not the responsibility of the health system alone. It is the responsibility of relevant organisations to follow up on the policy and program areas identified in this research.

This research does not explore illness or 'problems'; rather it focuses on exploring the lives and experiences of young farmers from their viewpoint. The Social Determinants of Health have been used as a framework for interview questions as this approach focuses on the causes relating to issues that young farmers may be experiencing. The Social Determinants researched in this study included Work, History, Income, Meaning, Stress, Isolation, Education, Environment, Relationships and Social Supports, Economics and Policy.

Method

'Kicking the Dust' is a qualitative research project that utilises semi-structured interviews with young farmers in the Southern Mallee region. This region comprises of broad acre cereal farming, livestock production, potato production and other intensive farming activities. Farms ranged from 3,500 acres to 10,000 acres with rainfall ranges from 300 millimetres to 350 millimetres in the Lameroo, Pinnaroo, Parilla and Karoonda districts. Young farmers were aged between 18 and 35 (12 males & 3 females) and were interviewed on their properties. The interview data was transcribed and analysed with existing literature to identify relevant policy issues for young farmers. A follow-up focus group was held with young farmers to confirm results and discuss recommendations for future actions on the findings of the data analysis.

As part of data collection for the research, the participants were interviewed on a broad range of their farming experiences including: family and farming history; economics and business; education; working hours, conditions and off farm work; stress and isolation; meaning, values, enjoyment and challenges; health and help seeking; globalisation; environmental issues and drought; technology; communication; advocacy, representation and policy; and the future of farming. Mid North Health and Mallee Health Service will be involved in the transfer of knowledge to other agencies and organisations who may have interest in the findings from this research for future planning, research and policy development.

The research is a replicated study of an existing research project with young farmers in the Mid North of South Australia.



The Voice of Young Farmers

The following information is a summary of the findings from the interviews completed with young farmers in the Southern Mallee region:

History

- A lack of opportunity to enter the farming industry for young farmers.
- High land prices are creating difficulties to enter, expand and consolidate farms.
- Parental support was required to enter farming.
- Opportunity within families is dependant on number of siblings, number of generations working on the farm, size of the farm and profitability of the farm.

Meaning

- The meaning is the reason why young farmers entered, continued and could see a positive future in farming
- Most young farmers expressed that it was more than “just about the income”
- Important features relating to meaning included; born and bred to be farmers, control and decision making opportunities, intergenerational and working with family, innovative industry to be involved with, working in open spaces, the physical nature of the work, working with machinery and working with animals.
- Young farmers stated that they would only consider leaving the farm if something serious came up for example; family breakdown, injury or being forced off due to financial reasons.
- Most young farmers reported if they were not farming they would be involved with a closely allied industry or occupation.

Work

- All young farmers are actively involved with decision making on the farm and hold various levels of responsibility for book work and financial matters.
- Many young farmers have specialised skills in particular areas on the farm.
- All young farmers use accountants, bank managers and financial advisors/planners to assist with their business and financial decisions and management.
- Young farmers are working on average 40-60 hours per week, with up to 100 hours per week for 5-10 weeks per year at busy times.
- Most young farmers work with family members and some employ several workers to assist when busy, with some young farmers employing and managing several workers full time.
- Several young farmers use contractors for specialist tasks and some contract to other farmers.
- Some young farmers parents and partners were working off farm for additional income.
- Many young farmers reported that they worked as part of a “family team” where each person had a particular role to play in the working of the farm based upon their own skills and experience.

Income

- Most young farmers reported having enough income to live; however, they also reported being satisfied with a moderate level of living standard.
- Farmers were concerned about their financial position particularly the rising input costs, decreasing profit margins and the effects of drought.

The Voice of Young Farmers

- Most young farmers reported accessing Exceptional Circumstances payments; either interest rate subsidies and/or income support
- There were some reports of young farmers having some problems with accessing continuation of these supports.

Stress

- All young farmers reported that they did not experience unmanageable levels of stress or social and geographical isolation.
- Young farmers reported that their parents were their major emotional support along with their partners and siblings
- Most farmers have time off away from their farms (average 2-3 weeks) recognising the need to be absent from their farms to avoid the pressures of work

Health Services

- Young farmers reported that they utilised general practitioners and allied health services on a regular or as needed basis
- Many reported satisfaction with the services that they accessed either locally, in regional centres or in Adelaide
- Some concerns reported regarding waiting times for visiting services, and recruiting and retaining general practitioners
- Some young farmers reported a preference for attending some medical and allied health services in Adelaide

Education

- The majority of young farmers have completed the South Australian Certificate of Education and some form of tertiary education through universities, apprenticeships and other Registered Training Organisations in South Australia and Victoria

- Education backgrounds include: Accounting, Agronomy, Business Management, Agricultural Science, On-Farm Training and Trade Qualifications.
- Young farmers did not report many barriers to accessing educational opportunities
- Young farmers reported that their ongoing education needs were keeping up with changes in property management, advances in grain marketing, improvements in livestock management and acquiring more knowledge about business skills
- Young farmers emphasised the need for courses to be up to date and innovative
- Many young farmers reported that farm groups were a continuing source of education
- Some young farmers mentioned the lack of promotion at schools and universities for farming and agricultural industries as a positive career pathway

Environment

- All young farmers reported being interested in environmental management of their farms
- Future concerns include soil erosion, sand drift, climate change, underground water supplies, weed resistance, pushing the land due to decreasing profit margins, and land damage due to the ongoing drought.
- The majority of farmers reported using no till practices on their farms
- Others reported using crop and spray rotations and some were using sheep as part of their crop rotations
- Some farmers reported that they would like to do more to promote longer term sustainability of farm land but reported difficulties due to cost and time available

The Voice of Young Farmers

- There are mixed views regarding the presence of climate change, with some farmers reporting they are convinced it is occurring, while others undecided about cyclic, human and natural impacts.

Drought

- Environmental impacts of drought included wind erosion, sand drift, the effects on livestock, and damage to permanent pastures.
- Many reported that the drought had created more work due to increased livestock feeding and the extra costs involved with this
- Many did report that they had made some preparation for drought but were still “caught out” by the length of the 06/07 drought
- Most young farmers reported that Exceptional Circumstances payments have been useful
- Some young farmers reported that they would prefer investment in rural communities (parks, roads, community projects) rather than one off “feel good” grants to community groups

Policy/Regulation

- OH & S compliance on the farm was recognised as important and necessary, however, young farmers mentioned difficulties around the costs, time involved, and continuing changes in regulations.
- Young farmers recognise some of the pressures facing them both globally and locally including the difficulties of a competitive global market, varying levels of global farm subsidies, the impact of global lobbying groups without engaging locally with farmers, rising costs of farming, and the level of investment in rural farming communities.
- Farmers reported concern with rising prices for fuel, fertilizer and other inputs being influenced by the global environment

- Young farmers recognised the growing opportunities in farming due to increased demands for food and bio-fuels.

- There are ethical concerns regarding the impacts of bio-fuel investment on food supplies globally and the increasing costs of farming
- Young farmers felt that rural communities were suffering from a lack of investment in rural infrastructure, business support and services.
- Young farmers reported that small populations made it difficult for rural communities to influence policy and investment in rural communities by government
- Young farmers were concerned with the moratorium on Genetically Modified crops, and the lack of informed public debate.

Farming Organisations

- Young farmers reported that they were not members of any farming advocacy groups
- Some young farmers are involved in farming practice’ groups in South Australia and Victoria that promote sustainability and innovation in sustainable farm management practices.
- Most young farmers reported the need for farming groups to be practical and innovative to remain relevant to their needs.

Public Perception

- Young farmers believed that there is a need to portray a positive image of farming and the farming industry
- Farmers expressed awareness of public perception that farmers are ‘hicks’, ‘old’ and ‘complaining’; and media coverage and programs reinforced this.
- There was also a lack of public awareness and recognition of the positive aspects of farming;

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including innovation, leadership, environmental practices, business skills and the complexity of farming

- Young farmers said there seems to be less contact with, and knowledge about farming from the urban population

Social Outlets

- All young farmers reported that they were happy with their current social life and social opportunities
- Most young farmers spent time playing sport, socialising with friends at local sporting clubs, hotels, and local service clubs and farming groups
- Most young farmers also reported spending a significant amount of time with families and friends at home.
- Some farmers reported travelling to Adelaide and other areas of the state regularly to socialise with friends and family members

Succession/Inheritance

- All young farmers reported having discussed succession of the farm with their families
- Some have been able to put concrete plans in place while others are currently planning how this process will occur
- Some young farmers reported that their own families had learnt a lot about succession from local families who had experienced negative issues with succession

Future of Farming

- Most young farmers reported feeling positive about their future and were excited by changes occurring in the farming industries
- Most young farmers believe that farms will continue to increase in size with the population of farmers continuing to decrease with larger

corporate models and farming technologies becoming a major feature.

- Concerns for the future include rising land prices, increasing input costs, fluctuating commodity prices, decreasing profit margins, climate change and rural decline.
- Young farmers believed that only those that love farming will stay in the industry.

Corporate Farming

- Young farmers raised the issue of larger corporate models of farming
- Some young farmers acknowledged that corporate leasing arrangements may provide farmers with opportunities to improve their skills as employed farm managers or contractors, and provide opportunities to be a farmer without having to own the land
- Many young farmers believed that corporate farming could add to the problems associated with decline in rural communities with less farming families in the district.
- There was also fear that farming land would become too expensive for local farmers to purchase as corporate companies can afford to pay above the 'going' price

Discussion

Despite the presence of an aging and declining population of farmers, the opportunity to become a farmer is a unique one that is dependent on family history, ownership and viability of a property; the presence of a supportive family, community and economic environment; and the personal skills, history, enthusiasm and commitment of young farmers themselves. The presence of all these factors can also be attributed to the health and wellbeing of young farmers, and their ability to manage and remain resilient to the unique stressors present in farming. This has enabled young farmers in the Southern Mallee region to remain optimistic and continue to develop their skills to maintain a meaningful and viable lifestyle and career in farming.

Young farmers in the Southern Mallee are also acutely aware of the pressures beyond their control that have an influence on their current and future viability including the rising costs of farm inputs, decreasing profit margins, global markets and inequalities, climatic changes and/or weather patterns, local and national policy demands, and rural decline. These factors have increased demands on their role as farmers, influenced their ability to maintain sustainable land management, and their opportunities to expand to maintain competitive, efficient and viable. Young farmers also recognise these factors as being interdependent with the growth of global opportunities and innovation in the farming industry. This has resulted in a combined sense of optimism and fear in their futures in farming. They face the dilemma of wanting to be a continuing part of the change and innovation in the industry; but recognise that these changes may also increase risks, costs, and competition that may inevitably force them or others out of the industry.

Due to the complexity of social, community, economic, global and environmental factors that influence the lives of young farmers; future approaches to supporting their health need to utilise a Public Health approach. This will include working on the Social Determinants of Health, and looking at how a concept of 'Health in all Policies' can support their long term health and viability in farming.



Recommendations

The findings of this research on young farmers support a Public Health approach to this population, with particular focus on the Social Determinants of Health. This was evidenced by young farmers awareness that it is the social, community, economic, global, and environmental factors that would have the greatest impact on their viability as farmers, and subsequently their wellbeing. Therefore, strategies to support the health of this population need to be targeted towards departments, groups and policy makers outside of health that can improve and sustain young farmers opportunities in farming and in rural communities.

While many of the issues identified by young farmers represent some of the broader global and national discussions and debates around the functioning of farming related industries in the Australian and global market; there are a number of other strategies that could support young farmers to enter and maintain a future in farming, and to put their voices and ideas into local, national and global discussion. The following is a list of recommendations that aim to promote opportunities for young farmers to enter, remain and influence a future in farming through policies and strategies that support their health:

To promote a positive and realistic perception of young farmers, the farming industry, rural communities and rural opportunities.

Media, news and public portrayal of farming, rural communities and young farmers appears to have created and reinforced a number of negative perceptions that young farmers expressed as being unrealistic and negative; this has been reinforced by coverage of the 2006/2007 drought. These portrayals were seen as discouraging those that were interested in farming and farming related industries; increasing the divide between the urban perceptions of farming and rural communities and the realities of living and working in rural communities; inaccurate depictions of young farmers as unskilled, depressed, stressed and isolated; and the subsequent political and policy responses to rural populations.

Strategies to improve this perception may include:

- Media and public recognition of achievements, innovations and opportunities in farming and rural communities
- Support, encourage and develop better pathways for young people to enter farming or farming related industry through Schools and Tertiary Institutions.
- Investigate methods that can decrease the rural-urban divide and increase urban awareness about the role of farmers, the contribution of the farming industries and rural communities, and the opportunities, challenges and complexities of current farming businesses

Recommendations

To provide supportive and meaningful opportunities for young farmers to participate in policy processes that effect their lives.

It is recognised that the policy process requires mutual participation of policy makers and communities in discussion and debate to inform policy directions. Young farmers discussed the importance of their participation in the policy process but expressed difficulties due to their work commitments, the lack of local policy participation opportunities, the lack of political voice due to small rural and farming populations, overemphasis on consulting with older farmers, and the lack of incentive due to their own recognition that major policy concerns were associated with Australian farmers as being 'price and policy takers'.

Strategies to improve young farmers participation in the policy process include:

- Policy makers recognising that young farmers have different skills and needs to older farmers.
- Policy makers visiting rural communities where young farmers reside to consult with them individually, or through existing farming, agronomy and agribusiness groups that have higher levels of young farmer participation.
- Feedback to young farmers about how their consultation has been utilised in making decisions and policy.

To promote an awareness of the global impacts on the farming industry

Young farmers recognised how their viability was directly related to a number of global variables including international policies, the variances in farming subsidies globally, global commodity prices, cost of farm related products, global lobby groups and more recently climate change. Whilst it is recognised that many of the global variables are difficult to influence, young farmers reported the need for farmers, the general public and policy makers to take into consideration the impact of these factors on their farm's viability.

Strategies to increase awareness of these global factors may include:

- Increased communication to young farmers about the existing/future influences on the price of farming commodities and the cost of farm inputs
- Investment in opportunities and incentives for young farmers to participate in local and global conferences and discussions that can inform Australian and International young farmers about the impacts and opportunities of globalisation

Recommendations

Increase investment in rural community infrastructure, services and rural business incentives.

Young farmers recognised that their opportunity to farm is interdependent with the services, businesses and opportunities in rural communities that can support their farming businesses and their family and community life. Young farmers reported being satisfied with the social opportunities in their local communities, however, they did express the need for increased support for community infrastructure and services to maintain and support community participation in local community and sporting groups in the future, particularly to prevent rural decline.

Strategies that they identified included:

- Financial support for the development of community sporting and social infrastructure
- Incentives for maintaining and developing local businesses and service providers in rural communities.

To consult with young farmers to develop a reciprocal approach to natural resource management by both farmers, governments and environmental organisations.

Young farmers expressed an awareness, commitment and current participation in sustainable natural resource management practices. They also expressed that influences such as time, existing workloads, decreasing profit margins, and costs can often be immediate barriers to environmental management practices. To overcome some of these barriers further consultation with young farmers is required to:

- Identify both the economic and workforce demands of future environmental management practices on farmers
- Develop strategies for mutual responsibility for supporting the short and long term practicality and economic viability of sustainable environmental management practices
- Increase investment in the monitoring of underground water levels/water quality and communicating these results with young farmers in the Mallee
- Increased support for localised research into crop breeding, livestock management, biotechnology and affordable farming technologies that support sustainable farming practices in the Mallee region

Recommendations

To support lifelong learning opportunities for young farmers

Young farmers reported participating in a number of educational opportunities that have developed and continue to develop their capacity to remain viable in farming. Some of these opportunities have been supported by the government and young farmers reported the need for this support to continue.

Young farmers reported their learning needs were:

- Ongoing educational opportunities in marketing, agribusiness, and business management to keep informed about the changes and opportunities in farming markets
- Updates on new environmental and livestock management techniques
- Education programs that are practical, innovative and delivered by practising experts in the field including current farmers
- Support for programs such as 'Farmbis' that support farmers opportunities to participate in education
- Support for farming groups to remain updated with innovative farming practices and technologies
- Education programs that are timely and flexible to the work demands of young farmers
- To avoid repetition of educational topics

Farming Futures

Young farmers were aware that the farming industries, markets and technologies were progressing rapidly locally and globally. Young farmers reported that they were supportive of rapid progress but recognised the need for further research and debate about:

- The future role of larger corporate farms and smaller family farms, and methods to ensure both can continue to remain viable to prevent social and population impacts on rural communities.
- The growing opportunities in the Bio-fuel market, and ethical debates surrounding farming production for food or fuel
- The role of Genetically Modified crops in South Australia
- The role of global lobby/pressure groups, and the need for these groups to enter into informed and mutual debate with farmers and policy makers due to their potential economic and social impact on rural communities
- Forming a future vision/strategic plan for investment in farming and farming related industries in Australia and South Australia

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This study is part of Ann Clarke's Doctorate in Public Health at the Flinders University of South Australia. Further information and recommendations from the Mid North study including literature review will be released later in 2008 following completion of the Public Health research dissertation on: 'What do the lives and experiences of young farmers in Mid North of South Australia tell us about Public Policy?'



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Researcher Contact Details:

Ann Clarke

Email: annclar@bigpond.com

Bradley Morgan

Email: Bradley.Morgan@health.sa.gov.au

