

Kicking the Dust



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

Ann Clarke & Bradley Morgan

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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 social, economic and community environments that influence young farmers health. 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 utilised semi-structured interviews with young farmers in the Mid North and Southern Mallee regions in South Australia. The Mid North region comprises of broad acre farmers who grow a range of grains, wool and livestock. Farms ranged in size from 1000 acres to 40,000 acres with rainfall ranges from 300-600 millimetres. Research in the Mid North included young farmers in the Jamestown, Orroroo, Peterborough, Booleroo Centre, Carrieton, Hallett, and Wirrabara regions. The Southern Mallee 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 300-350 millimetres. Research in the Southern Mallee included young farmers in the Lameroo, Pinnaroo, Parilla and Karoonda regions.

Young farmers were aged between 18 and 35 (28 males & 7 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. Interviews were conducted with young farmers in the Mid North in July-August 2007 with follow up focus groups occurring in September 2007 and February 2008. A replication of the study occurred with young farmers in the Southern Mallee region in May-June 2008 with a follow up focus group occurring in July 2008. 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 Voice of Young Farmers

The following information is a summary of the main findings from the interviews completed with farmers in the Mid North and Southern Mallee region:

History

All young farmers have reported they were third to fifth generation farmers.

They recognised that the opportunity to become a farmer is dependent on the support that they receive from families, the number of people reliant on farm income, and the size and profitability of the farm.

It is difficult to enter farming independently or without a history in farming due to high land prices, high cost of setting up a farm, and high inputs.

Meaning

The meaning is the reason why young farmers entered, continued and could see a future in farming.

Features of farming that they found meaningful included: personal and family history; working with the environment and/or livestock; working as part of a family team; working with machinery; seeing change and innovation; physical work; attachment to the rural lifestyle; and open spaces.

Young farmers reported that they would only leave the farm in extreme circumstances such as family breakdown or being forced off due to financial reasons.

All young farmers reported that they 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, with varying levels of responsibility for book work and business management.

All young farmers use accountants, bank managers and financial advisers to assist with their business and financial decisions and management.

Young farmers are working between 40-70 hours a week, with most working approximately 100 hours per week for 5-10 weeks during busy periods of the year.

Most young farmers work with family members, with some employing several workers to assist during busy periods or full time.

Some young farmers employ contractors for specialist tasks, while other work as contractors to other farms.

Most young farmers in the Mid North reported that they and/or their partners were working off farm for additional income. A smaller number of young farmers reported that they or their partners worked off farm.

Many young farmers reported that they worked as part of a family team where each person has a particular role to play in the working of the farm based upon their skills and knowledge.

Income

Most young farmers in the Southern Mallee reported that they received enough income from the farm to live.

Most young farmers in the Mid North reported that they were reliant on off farm income sources to supplement smaller incomes on the farm.

Most young farmers reported being able to access Exceptional Circumstances payments. Some young farmers reported difficulty accessing continuation

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of supports, and receiving supports due to the presence of a family member working off farm. Some young farmers reported not needing to apply or access supports available.

Stress

All young farmers reported that they did not experience unmanageable levels of stress, nor did they feel socially or geographically isolated.

The stressors that were mentioned included weather, commodity prices, debt, workloads, organising farm work, and the uncertainty of farming.

Most young farmers reported that their parents were their main emotional supports along with partners or siblings.

Some young farmers reported some stress working with family members due to the farming business.

Health Services

Most young farmers reported utilising General Practitioners and Allied Health services on a regular or needs basis.

Many reported satisfaction with services that they accessed locally, or in regional centres or Adelaide.

Some reported preference for attending medical and allied health services in Adelaide due to the presence of family and friends in the city.

Some of the concerns reported included waiting times for visiting services and recruiting and retaining General Practitioners in some communities.

Some of the farmers reported non-attendance at health services due to feeling uncomfortable, not having confidence in health professionals, some of the services have not been useful in the past, and feeling as if they were being 'told off'.

Education

All young farmers reported participating in some form of qualification or certificate in farming through universities, apprenticeships or other Registered Training Organisations.

Education backgrounds include Agriculture, Accounting, Business Management, Finance, Agricultural Science, On-Farm Training and Trade Qualifications.

Many young farmers reported the importance of learning skills from other farmers or family members. Young farmers did not report that they experienced any barriers to accessing education.

Ongoing educational needs identified in the Mallee and the Mid North included keeping up with changes in property management, advances in grain marketing, improvements in livestock management and acquiring more knowledge in business skills.

Young farmers reported the need for education to be more conveniently timed and emphasised the need for courses to be up to date and innovative.

Many young farmers, particularly in the Mallee, reported that farm groups were a continuing source of education.

Some young farmers mentioned the lack of promotion at schools of farming and agricultural industries as a positive career pathway.

Environment

All young farmers were aware of environmental issues and were all practicing some form of environmental conservation including tree planting, no tillage, direct drilling, cell grazing, rotational grazing, crop and spray rotation, contour banks and planting salt bush to manage salinity.

Future concerns include soil erosion, climate change,

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underground water supplies, weed resistance, pushing the land due to decreasing profit margins, pest management and land damage as a result of drought.

Some young farmers reported that they would like to do more to promote longer term sustainability of the property but reported that cost, time available and existing workloads were barriers.

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

Drought

Young farmers discussed a number of the environmental impacts of drought including erosion, sand drift, decreased yields, impacts on livestock and damage to permanent pastures.

Many farmers reported that the drought increased their workloads due to increased livestock feeding and the extra costs involve with this.

Many farmers reported that they had made some preparation for drought, but were caught out by successive bad years.

Many also reported concern around the longer term financial impacts of the drought.

Most young farmers were supportive of the Exceptional Circumstances payments as a drought response.

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 as part of the drought response.

Policy/Regulation

Management of risks and compliance with Occupational Health and Safety were recognised as important and necessary but were difficult due to the costs, time involved and continuing changes in regulations.

Young farmers were aware that their farms viability was directly related to both local and global pressures including global competitiveness, varying levels of farm subsidies globally, the impact of lobby groups without local engagement with farmers, rising costs of farming, rural decline and the level of investment in rural communities.

All young farmers reported concerns with rising cost of inputs such as fuel, fertiliser and sprays that were influenced by the global environment.

Young farmers recognised the growing opportunities in farming due to global population growth and investment in biofuels. However, there were some mentions of the ethical concerns regarding food supplies and the increasing costs of farming.

Young farmers expressed concern that rural communities were suffering from a lack of investment in rural infrastructure, business incentives and services.

Mid North farmers raised the growth of mining in the north of the state as having both negative and positive impacts on rural communities. They recognised the growth of economic and employment opportunities for rural populations, but raised concerns about the social impacts on workers, rural communities and families that live/work between mines and communities.

Young farmers recognised that small rural populations made it difficult for rural communities to influence policy and investment in rural

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communities by government.

Some young farmers reported concern with the moratorium on Genetically Modified crops, and the lack of informed public debate.

Farming Organisations

Most farmers reported that they were not members of any farming advocacy groups.

Some young farmers reported being involved with farming practice, sustainability and agribusiness groups.

Young farmers said that they would only go to groups that promote sustainability and innovative practices that can be applied to their properties or farming businesses.

Some young farmers reported concern about the lack of government supports for young farmers with recognition that they have differing needs to older farmers.

The small population of young farmers was recognised as preventing them from being represented or having a public voice.

Public Perception

All young farmers expressed that there was a need to portray a positive image of farming and the farming industry.

They were aware of negative public images of farmers as 'whinging', 'hicks' and 'old'. They reported

that this perception was a severely inaccurate description of the current complexities, responsibilities and skills required to remain in farming.

There was also a lack of public awareness about the positive aspects of farming such as innovation, leadership, environmental management, business skills and managing complex and variable factors.

Young farmers said that their seems to be less contact and knowledge about farming from the urban population.

Social Outlets

All young farmers reported being satisfied with their social opportunities in rural communities.

Most young farmers reported that they spent time playing sport, attending local sporting, service and farming groups, and socialising in local hotels.

Some farmers reported travelling to Adelaide and other areas of the state regularly to socialise with friends and family.

Succession/Inheritance

All young farmers reported being at varying levels of succession planning with their families.

Some have been able to put in concrete plans, while others are currently planning how this process will occur due to having younger siblings still at school.

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Some families reported that their own families learnt about succession from families that have had negative experiences.

Some Mid North farmers reported difficulty forming succession plans due to parental refusal to discuss the issue.

Future of Farming

Most young farmers reported feeling optimistic about their future in farming and were excited by some of the changes occurring in the industry.

Most young farmers believe that farms will continue to grow in size with a continued decline in the number of farmers.

Some recognise that larger corporate models of farming and increased use of farming technologies will be a predominant feature in the future.

Some young farmers reported the rapidity of change that continues to occur in the industry.

Concerns that all farmers mentioned about their future in farming included rising land prices, increasing input costs, inconsistent commodity prices, decreasing profit margins, climate change and rural decline.

Young farmers reported that only those that love and have a history in farming will stay in the industry.

Corporate Farming

Mallee farmers recognised that corporate share and farm leasing arrangements were beginning to increase.

Many reported that these arrangements might provide opportunities for farmers to improve their skills as employed farm managers or contractors, and may also increase opportunities for people that want to be farmers without having to purchase land.

They also believed that this form of farming arrangement could add to issues associated with rural decline with less farming families in the community.

There was also fear that farming land would become too expensive for local farmers as corporate companies can afford to pay above the 'going' price, with decreased need for larger profit margins to support multiple families.

Discussion

Most of the findings in this research were consistent across both farming regions, despite significant variances in land size, type, and farming enterprises undertaken. This signifies the presence of similar policy, economic and community factors that influence the viability, opportunity and health of young farmers in South Australia. The opportunity to become a farmer in the Mid North and Southern Mallee is dependent on a number of factors including:

- Family history, ownership and viability of a property;
- The presence of a supportive family and community environment;
- Opportunities for participation in skill development, education and farming innovations
- A supportive economic and policy environment;
- 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 both regions to remain optimistic and continue to develop their skills to maintain a meaningful and viable lifestyle and career in farming.

Young farmers are also aware of the growing pressures on their farming futures that they do not have control over 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 recognise that these factors are also interdependent with their current and future opportunities in farming, and their farms future viability. This is evident in their commitment to ongoing learning, acceptance of change in the industry, and the development of their knowledge and skills in farming practice, business management, and environmental management that meets the growing skill demands of being a farmer.

The skills and commitment of young farmers would suggest that they have the capacity to maintain a viable and sustainable future in farming, and subsequently maintain a healthy lifestyle in farming. However, their future is not singularly dependent of their own capacity as individuals farmers; it is dependent on the ongoing presence of a supportive family, community, social, economic and policy environment that can support their continued viability in an uncertain global environment rich in both risk and opportunity.

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 that focuses on the Social Determinants of Health. Young farmers recognise that the best way for the government and other organisations to support their long term health will be to maintain and improve their economic viability; invest in policies, infrastructure and programs that support their families and local communities; and strategies that support sustainable management of natural resources.

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 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

To provide supportive and meaningful opportunities for young farmers to participate in policy processes that affects 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

Recommendations

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
- Support opportunities for young farmers to participate in local and global grain trade and marketing opportunities

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.

Recommendations

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 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
- Increased support for localised research into crop breeding, livestock management, biotechnology and affordable farming technologies that support sustainable farming practices

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 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, particularly in grain marketing and how farming commodities are traded
- 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

Recommendations

To support the health of young farmers through supporting their viability.

Young farmers expressed frustration at the current emphasis on short term strategies and the narrow focus of current approaches to supporting their health. They recognise that it is local and global inequalities that need to be addressed if they are to remain viable (and healthy) as farmers and queried the effectiveness of short term grants, social drought response strategies, mental health programs, and counselling in addressing the perceived causes of stress and Mental Illness in farmers. Young farmers recognised that the best strategy to support their long term health is to support their long term viability in farming through:

- Recognising that social and geographical isolation and stress were not identified by young farmers as major factors that influenced their health; factors they identified as risks were economic and rural policies that contributed to farming difficulties and the decline of rural communities (and rural social support networks).
- Young farmers reported that health services were not perceived as effective or suitable for managing the causes of stress and mental health issues; suggesting that future research and strategies on young farmers mental health and suicide need to look at the complex interrelationship of policy, economics, globalisation, local community, family and individual factors that influence farmers mental health.
- Young farmers in both groups reported that their most useful supports were those people in their 'inner circle' (parents, partners and siblings). This information provides important clues about how to support young farmers in small rural communities, and importantly how it relates to suicide prevention. This research suggests that to support young men in isolated rural locations is to provide support to their "inner circle" and to their local rural communities. Further research would be beneficial in this area.
- Investigating the need for changes in farming related industrial, economic and trade policies that can support young farmers viability in Australia

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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