



**ARGOS RESEARCH NOTE: NUMBER 12, MAY 2006**

## Positive aspects of wellbeing for ARGOS farmers

"We're actually Jack of all trades and master of none ... We look, we see, we learn, we take in what we see, and we believe what we see because we have the experience to back it up ... even though we don't have degrees after our name, I think we know more than ... the average person... We're not the black singled out Fred Dagg that we used to be portrayed to be ... I think it's a privilege to be a landowner and/or a country person ... I think we're rich - if you take [out] the money equation ... I wouldn't swap it for anything."

In the first interviews of the sheep/beef farming couples in the ARGOS programme, undertaken from June to November in 2004, it was apparent that farming had both positive and negative impacts on wellbeing. This research note, the first of three on wellbeing, describes the things about farming that made couples happy. The second covers the stresses of farming and the third how farmers have managed stress.

The wellbeing of farmers is an important aspect of the ARGOS programme because ultimately, no-one will continue farming if it does not contribute to their wellbeing. It is therefore important to consider the factors that contribute to wellbeing when promoting practices that enhance the environmental or economic sustainability of farming.

Satisfaction gained from farm work was most mentioned, followed by financial success and lifestyle. Being a farmer and the attachment to the land were also important.

### Satisfaction gained from farm work

ARGOS farmers liked the autonomy and flexibility of farm work, its hard physical, outdoor nature, the challenges it presented, and the recognition and feedback they received as a farmer. They said:

"We are as close, I believe, as we could ever be to being in control of our own environment. Whereas, if

we did anything else other than farming, somebody else would be ... controlling when I've got to start work in the morning, when I've got to knock off, when I've got to have my holidays ... what's put in the environment. Like we control what goes on inside our boundary ... We believe in certain things and we can actually go and do it without somebody saying you've got to do something else".

"I get my job satisfaction out of doing things myself and trying to do it well".

"And the real proof is when it goes out the gate in a truck".

"I'm happy if my stock are happy, they're looking well, they're fattening well and that's where I get my thrill".

### Achieving financial success but gaining satisfaction from other aspects of farming

For a few farming couples financial success was imperative. For the rest it was important to make a reasonable living but other aspects of wellbeing were also important.

"So, I think you've got to look at it [farming], not in terms of this year or next year. You've got to look at in terms of 15 to 20 years. So, I've looked at it as a secure form of investment, plus with a lot of personal satisfaction in it at the same time".

"When we got here she [the farm] was pretty rough. We've sort of knocked it into shape. The next stage is probably trees and a bit more drainage and just sort of titivating it up a bit here and there - but it all costs money ... [By the] end result you know we're doing the right thing but it doesn't often show in the bank balance ... [It] shows out there which is just as important..."

"We're not totally money driven ... We like to farm with good stock and good performance and produce a quality product ... in a sustainable way".

"For quite a few years we never even came out of overdraft and so it's a real nice thing to come into credit for a couple of months ... so that's a good indicator that things are going well ... when things have been tight and you have a massive tax bill, that's another indicator that things haven't been too bad".

"We seem to be getting on happily with the bank, they're happy with us. The accountant's happy with

how it's [going] ... We're happy with it. So as far as I'm concerned, that's all that counts".

### **The rural farming lifestyle**

Life on a farm is family oriented - a farm was regarded as a good place to bring up children. Flexibility is also a valued attribute of this way of life. Children are able to have closer ties with their parents and their work than many parents in other occupations. Many couples also valued the freedom to be involved with their children in sporting or school activities. Some quotes from the interviews about these attributes follow:

"We have a good life".

"When everything's going well, I suppose ... it's pretty cruisy really - it's a stress free sort of a lifestyle. I mean it can be as stressful as you want to make it. And a lot of that, those stresses are outside influence dictated which you can't do anything about anyway, but it's a pretty relaxed laid back sort of a lifestyle. You can sort of just come and go as you please. I mean, I know it has its busy times and everything else but ...".

Having a nice house and making it into a home was mentioned by women as contributing to a good lifestyle. Homes were where family leisure activities could take place. Dad was able to come and go from his farm work, and still be about and available to children. Some viewed the farm house as the hub of the farm, with importance placed on its position as central, both literally and figuratively. Some wanted to have a nice home while children were still at home, so considerable financial resources had been diverted from the farm to achieve this (which could also be a source of stress).

### **Being a farmer and owning a farm**

"Oh, I love farming, I really enjoy developing land, like this land here was not terribly productive when we first came here and I think in the first 5 years we doubled the production both physically and financially and that was tremendous. I really enjoyed that, breaking in rough country and making it into nice paddocks ...".

### **Attachment to the land and the place**

People felt connected to the land. One woman said, she liked "... just being more part of the place that you live in". For some this attachment to the land was because they had 'made' it the way it was – they had a sense of ownership of it. For most, however, it was related to the landscape, the birds and animals inhabiting that landscape, the peace or awe that they sensed in this environment, and the relief from stress it gave them.

"Oh, it's something about the hills - just peaceful and quiet ... I enjoy the hills. I spend quite a bit of time up there just walking in the hills and working ... just a nice place to be. Solitude and quiet".

Many women spoke of the view out the window: "Looking out there now has got to make you happy". The comments made, mainly by women, conveyed a feeling of spiritual wellbeing: "The bellbirds ... every time you hear them it lifts your spirit right up," and "You're living ... a cycle, but it's a cycle of life and ... that part's exciting, you know".

### **Comparisons**

The things that contributed to the wellbeing of farmers were remarkably similar across the organic, integrated and conventional panels. From the above comments it is obvious that women's wellbeing was sometimes different from men's. Without making judgements about what a women's role 'should' be it was apparent that women took pleasure in providing a home for their family and noticed and enjoyed the environment around the home. The former plays an important part in sustainability through providing a secure environment and base for farm life.

### **Conclusion**

When starting farming, couples appear to focus on the need for financial security, having a suitable home and good relationships. Once the former two needs are met they are able to place more emphasis on making sustainable and resilient practices part of everyday working life. Such practices help to maintain the viability of farming and may well be rewarded by increasing access to overseas markets through the quality assurance imposed by supermarket chains. Practices that are visible on the landscape as healthy plants, trees, and stock, and other beneficial animals, birds and insects that people take pride in and satisfaction from may encourage greater sustainability.

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