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What makes ARGOS farmers stressed?

"I think stress is quite a big one for farmers. I talk to lots of my friends, a lot of our friends farm, and lots of girls anyway, think that their husbands really are terribly stressed" (woman).

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 second of three on wellbeing, describes the things about farming that made couples stressed. The first covered the positive aspects of farming and the third how farmers managed stress.

Sustainability is not just about farms and their financial, environmental and community viability. Farming couples also need to be resilient and so their wellbeing is very much intertwined with sustainable practices.

Stress can be related to issues inherent in farming. There are always decisions to be made about how to spend time and money, and differences over these decisions can create stress between couples. Then there are the many things over which farmers have no control – the weather and the exchange rate, for example. Wider family relationships, particularly issues of succession, cause a lot of stress and some families were financially stretched. Also, farmers were constantly comparing themselves with others. The following note describes these stresses.

On a farm the work is never done

Farming couples felt that that they had to work all the time to get the necessary things done, rarely being able to take time off. The farm seemed to be a place to 'escape' from.

People talked about time off the farm as: "... having an escape from time to time", "... getting away off the place", "... remove yourself from it", or "If you can, get away and enjoy life ... have holidays with your family".

"It's hard to manage to get some time off. And he doesn't actually know that a Sunday is a Sunday. Just every day of the week is the same for him ... three [children] ... were playing sport this year ... but because it's feeding out time ... he didn't get to see any of their winter sport, which is not very good."

Woman: "The only draw back is that if you do want to go away, it's a hassle."

Man: "Yeah. Holidays are a bit hard."

Woman: "We just don't have them" (laughs).

Lack of control over factors such as weather

The stress felt by having to deal with extreme weather and its impacts was mentioned frequently, to the extent, for example, that when it rained people were glad.

"This is good rain - that makes you happy. Oh, there's nothing better than waking up [hearing the rain]."

"When I started off farming ... we got hit with two weeks [of] snow, and that stuffs us up for four to five years. 350 of our ewes ... stopped [cycling], 120 of our younger hoggets stopped, and that affected us financially and also affected our flock because those were the best breeding years."

Tension between husband and wife

Many couples experienced tension over the priorities placed on home and children and time spent with the family compared with the farm, different financial priorities, and differing thresholds on financial risk.

Women often placed a greater emphasis on having a nice home than did men. This inevitably took money away from investment

in the farm. Women saw the home as an investment in family life.

“... he keeps going on about the money, how much the house costs but... [it's a] fraction of the irrigation.”

Men also indicated by how they spent their time that the farm came before watching the children play sport or taking time off for holidays as described earlier.

Where money is invested can be a source of disagreement between husband and wife:

... Buying more [land] is what you [husband]'d prefer to do but I think we've got enough capital tied up in the farm. It doesn't seem to be a very good investment as far as I can see ...” (woman).

“... [my husband] will disagree with me intensely, but I think there's far too much money been spent on machinery and it devalues, and I'm not sure that it's giving us the returns that it should do” (woman).

Some couples felt differently about the level of risk to take. For example, there could be tension about how much debt to carry.

Woman: “Oh, we're always having this discussion ... especially as far as the fertiliser goes, whether we should just ... bite the bullet and go into overdraft more ... and fertilise the whole property ... because I'm of the opinion that if we do that, although we mightn't get the return instantly we will get it sort of later on down the track ... but, yeah [my husband] is not a great one for [that].”

Man: “I don't like getting in too much debt, that's my worry.”

Woman: “Whereas ... I say that you will get the benefit from it in the end ... but it's trying to convince him...”

Man: “Until you get the drought one year ... and the flood the next year”.

Working through succession issues

There was frequent mention of tension between fathers and sons or daughters over doing things differently on the farm, or as a legacy of how the succession was managed.

“It's probably, to be fair, a measure of our age ... 'cause a lot of our friends have just gone through family sort outs ... and I mean that is stressful for our age and it's the same for my parents ... I think succession is particularly stressful for everybody concerned. You know, it's stressful for the person going onto the farm and for the parents to try and be fair to other siblings.”

In some cases fathers had practiced different types of farming to their sons and sons found it very difficult trying to manage what they wanted to do while maintaining what the father wanted as well. As one farmer said of the conflict with his father, “It sort of wears you out after a while”.

Financial worries

Some people, mainly women, gave the impression that financially they were finding

things difficult. One woman said that it is all very well saying living on a farm is a wonderful lifestyle, as urban people liked to tell them, but “... if you live on a farm and you're scrimping and scraping – well, you can't live on sunshine and fresh air can you?”

For some farmers the cost of secondary schooling for their children was a great worry. One admitted to an almost unspeakable thought: “We say geez, why didn't we have two kids or no kids? Every now and then it would be nice not to have to worry about it”.

Comparison with others

During the interviews 27 farming couples compared themselves with others in one way or another which in itself can put them under stress. Perhaps comparison is a process of learning, or a competition, a way of measuring their own worth against the achievements of others. This attitude may also indicate an uncertainty about participants' identity as farmers in a political environment in which farmers are no longer valued as ‘the backbone of New Zealand’.

Comparisons between panels

When compared across the organic, integrated and conventional panels, conventional farming couples appeared more likely to emphasise problems relating to the difficulty of ‘escaping’ from the farm. It may be because of this stress difference that tension within conventional farming couples was more apparent. Conventional farming couples were also more likely to have mentioned succession issues.

Conclusion

If sustainable farming is to become an attractive practice it is important that it addresses the stresses of farming. However, if sustainable practices became an added burden that take up more time, are more costly, and have to be accounted for by a paper trail, they are less likely to be adopted.

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