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Ways in which farmers managed the stress of farming

In the first interviews of the sheep/beef farming couples in the ARGOS programme, it was apparent that some ARGOS farmers were very conscious of how the farm could or had dominated their lives. For example, they indicated that "... because it can be all consuming, the work is never done on a farm" or, "I'm not going to be a slave to the place – used to be but ...". In response they had decided to organise the farm around the needs of their families and themselves. For some, change was associated with their reduced ability to continue the physically demanding work of farming. This research note, the third of three on wellbeing, outlines the strategies that farming couples used to manage the stress of farming. The first and second notes cover positive and negative aspects of wellbeing.

Reorganisation of farming life

Strategies reflected an awareness of the flexibility, choice and control farmers had over what they did each day and from year to year. One approach was to employ another person to give the farmer more time to do what s/he wants to and to work fewer hours:

"Part of the idea of growing our business to this size is being able to have a full time person working for us so if there was actually time for ourselves, time for me to try and possibly do some more bookwork than I do but yeah ... we're trying not to work 80 hours a week ..."

Another approach was to make conscious choices about how much work to do by changing priorities and planning:

"I could push this farm a lot harder. I could make more money, but you've still got to enjoy life."

"We got offered irrigation and that was a big nightmare ... We looked at what we were going to gain out of irrigation, and financially we wouldn't be any better off,

only when we sold ... but we're not going to [sell]. Hopefully, we're going to be here for a fair while. And if we put the irrigation in, the debt was going to be pretty savage. And, since we couldn't irrigate all of the farm, we had to work the dry land a lot harder ... And then we sort of got down to the labour. There wasn't enough to employ an extra person to work it. And all I was going to do was work harder and for very little gain ... So we decided to go dry and yeah ... enjoy life better ... we try and get our holidays at Christmas time when the kids are on holiday ... If you've got irrigation, that's when you're flat out."

One farmer changed to farming prime lambs and cattle, and another was making similar changes to lamb finishing so that he would not have to go through lambing.

Changing personal attitudes

As illustrated above, some farming couples were determined to focus on enjoying what they did. If the 'downs' of farming were seen as part and parcel of farming life and not something to get upset about, and the 'ups' were focused on as the things about farming to be appreciated, then stress was reduced.

Being aware of one's own goals and differentiating themselves from others was also found to be useful, as this farmer said: I'm not interested in being a big shot farmer and buying up half the area and having huge gear."

Several men stated that they were not going to be like their father and put the farm first all the time and have no other interests.

Another possible strategy is acceptance by wives that their husbands are going to work long hours. In this situation the home environment becomes important because if it is a good, happy place to be, then children will be content to be at home and to bring friends home. When the father comes and

goes they will be able to see him and participate in what he is doing.

Personal identity: purpose and attitude

Wellbeing was sustained by a strong sense of purpose and a sense of the privilege of being a farmer. Purpose and privilege were related to caring for the environment and attitudes to change, resilience and the challenge of surviving.

Several farmers had a feeling of 'generic succession' - a responsibility to care for the land whether or not the next generation was made up of their own descendants.

"I'm only here to try and improve it [the land] for the next generation ... I'm only a caretaker of it. I'm here to try and leave it in better order than what I found it and hopefully the next generation'll do the same and yeah, it's just I want to try and do the best I can do and hopefully it'll be the best for me if I look after it."

Some farmers had a positive and constructive attitude to change. They saw the need to change and for this change to be led by what was needed at the time. It may mean using new technology, doing something new, producing what the market wanted, or doing the office work required and building an office in order to do this work more efficiently.

"[I've always taken] the view that if you don't try something new you're never going to make any gains."

Some farmers exhibited an attitude of persistence that enabled them to persevere with farming and survive. Others were more resilient in that they had taken and were taking active steps to ensure their survival. Both of these outlooks are epitomised by the perspective that 'this is how things are and we'd better learn to live with it'.

Perseverance often seemed to be a matter of assuming an attitude that facilitated hanging in there, the challenge being in surviving rather than in actively responding.

"I survived '85. We actually were technically bankrupt in '86 when they changed the rules. Our debt was as high as our asset because the farm value dropped so much. So I simply dug in and made the philosophy that I was going to last longer than Lange or Douglas in politics. So they didn't last very long and I carried on."

Many farming couples felt it was a privilege and honour to have the care of land and to be able to have a farming lifestyle.

"It's a great honour or privilege to get a crop to grow, and see the end results ... we always put the effort into every crop that we grow. We give every crop every chance to do its best, and it's not through our own fault [if] it doesn't work. It's just through weather, or you know, a hiccup."

"You know the land is really, really precious - to have given me ... the liberty to live in a place like this - and when we [have] our financial woes, you stop and you think. You know, I live in the best half of the world, I live in the best country in that part of the world, I live in the best island ... and I've got one of the best jobs ..."

Comparisons

Analysis of the farmers' responses indicated distinct approaches to stress among the organic, integrated and conventional panels in the ARGOS project. Conventional farming couples were more likely to have emphasised the stress of farming, while integrated couples were more likely to have developed and acted upon ways of dealing with it. This may be a product of participation in the audit systems required to meet retail supply demands. Integrated farmers have had to confront aspects of farming that caused them stress and may also feel that their work is valued by their supplier. As organic farmers did not talk about stress as much as those in other panels it is assumed that the choice to farm organically contributes positively to a couple's sense of wellbeing and identity.

Conclusion

Many farmers are under a lot of stress as they respond to all the things involved in being a farmer in the physical, economic and social environment in which they farm. By identifying themselves, how to better manage the stress of farming life, ARGOS participants have provided many hints for others to follow. It would seem important for farmers to realise the sense of control they can have over their own situation. Rather than increasing stress it appears that the reinforcement of a farming identity supplied by being a part of an audit system is a positive experience for farmers as they see themselves as producing a valued, quality, export product. The sense of purpose, achievement and identity attained by the reorganisation of farming practices to be more sustainable and resilient will play a part in a less stressful life for farming families.

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