

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING FARMER DISTRESS

Neels Botha

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METHOD

- Revisit NZ mental wellness, and adoption research
- Identify key factors that (potentially) contribute to farmer stress
- How farmers experience distress
- From the above:
 - Ideas: managing / avoiding stress related to council policy and compliance work (A farmer-centred information (delivery) approach)

CAUSES OF DISTRESS - SUMMARY

There are multiple causes of distress that vary across time and space:

- Farmers (many) are **time** poor because of **high workload**
- Struggle with **people issues** (farm staff, relationships....and Council?)
- Farmers generally try to minimise **effort**
- **Debt** and **on-farm expenses** are of concern
- Extreme climate events have big impacts
- Compliance (environment) brings uncertainty, risk, distress

CAUSES OF DISTRESS (BOTH AND WHITE, 2011, 2012)

Clusters of factors that caused stress were more common than single factors (2011)

The factors that caused stress, in order of importance, were: (2012)

- staff management and staff relationships (122 nominations)
- poor health of people other than household (104 nominations) (“sickness is a family affair”)
- debt and farming expenses (99 nominations)
- workload (85 nominations)

HOW FARMERS EXPERIENCE DISTRESS (ASSOCIATED WITH CHANGE) - SUMMARY

- Chronicity (duration) and/or Acuteness (severity) influence severity of distress
- Experiences/feelings of distress are mediated by (farmer) personality and support (farmers are not all the same)
- Farmers feel/experience/"live" distress at two levels:
 - cognitive (sense-making/thinking)
 - emotional
 - » these interact with their physical health
 - changes (adaptations) occur over time at both these levels
 - » the speed varies between individuals

Perceptions in 2005	Perceptions in 2009
It is not our fault	High stress levels (So)
Farmers are being unfairly targeted	Farmers are being unfairly targeted and the financial impacts on farming not sufficiently acknowledged
The matter will go to the Environment Court	There are and will be more huge negative socio-economic impacts like community split (So)
Disbelief research findings about farming's contribution to pollution	Disbelief research findings about farming's contribution to pollution, research is based on theory not farming reality and the computer program (OVERSEER) not accurate
We are the guardians of the lake (M)	We are the guardians of the lake (M)
Rules will limit farm development (M) and they will fail	Rules will limit farm development (M), they are required but not for farmers and they will fail

Farmers' emotional responses

	Shock and denial		Fear and anger		Bargaining		Depression		Acceptance	
	M	So	M	So	M	So	M	So	M	So
2005	6	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2009	0	0	0	8	0	4	1	1	5	0

MANAGING / AVOIDING STRESS RELATED TO COUNCIL POLICY AND COMPLIANCE WORK

A farmer perspective(?):

- Regional Councils can feel like a complex and intimidating maze that farmers are forced to navigate
- Many/most have difficulty understanding the language and processes
- Ideal situation to create feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and powerlessness

Providing information to farmers

A farmer-centred information (delivery) approach:

- Considers the on-farm impacts of the information (content) and acquiring it, might have in terms of:
 - Farmers' time
 - Effort required
 - Associated costs

A farmer-centred information (delivery) approach:

- Works in partnership with other role players, including farmers/ their organisations
- Communicates WITH not TO farmers
- Provides quality, timely information
- Encourages farmer involvement and empowerment, e.g.:
 - Deals with farmers' feelings first (particularly early on), then the rest
 - Shows empathy
 - » Empathy isn't about agreement, but acceptance of what the farmer is saying and feeling
 - Meets farmers at times and places that suit them, not Council staff
 - Exercises patience and shows tolerance
 - Goes the extra mile – does more than the minimum or legal requirement

A farmer-centred information (delivery) approach:

- Is prepared /ready to answer “why?”, “what now?” and “what if?” questions
- Helps farmers to understand / “get” what is happening and why; use uncomplicated/simple language, not council-speak
- Is honest - if you don’t know, say so
- Gets the pace of change right – tries to minimise uncertainty and risk for farmers, while getting the job done
- Informs farmers of what they have to do to comply OR actively provide alternatives that will help farmers to get that knowledge