

# Provision of social support services to farmers and rural communities in Canada

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2013 Secretary's Development Award

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## **Disclaimer**

The opinions, conclusions and any recommendations in this report are based on conditions encountered and information reviewed by Tara Inglis-Rheinberger at the date of preparation of the report. These opinions, conclusions and recommendations do not reflect the views of the Australian Government Department of Agriculture.

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## Executive summary

Australian farmers are exposed to a range of hardships which typically stem from financial, climatic, personal and health related stresses. These hardships can have significant impacts on a farmer's physical and mental health, as well as the wellbeing of their family, farm business and community.

In 2010-11 the Australian and Western Australian governments conducted a pilot of drought reform measures in Western Australia (WA pilot) which trialled a successful social support program for farmers and rural communities in the pilot region. This program was designed in response to the 2008–09 national review of drought policy which found that droughts have significant negative impacts on the mental wellbeing of farm families and rural communities. A review of the WA pilot in 2011 noted that social support services should be available at all times, be embedded in existing community services, utilise outreach as a mode of service delivery and be facilitated by strong coordination and communication between service providers.

In May 2013, an Intergovernmental Agreement on National Drought Program Reform (IGA) was agreed by Australian, state and territory primary industries ministers. Acknowledging the findings of the national review of drought policy and the WA pilot, the IGA includes an element on social support services for farmers and rural communities; a coordinated, collaborative approach to the provision of social support services.

This study tour of Canadian social support services for farmers and rural communities was undertaken to inform the Commonwealth's implementation of the social support element of the IGA with an international case study. While similarities exist between Australia and Canada with respect to government structure, the size of their agricultural sectors and the hardships faced by farmers, differences in the approach to social service provision to farmers provided an opportunity to learn from the Canadian experience.

In September 2013, consultations were held with government, non-government, community groups involved in providing social support services, and farmers, in five Canadian provinces. During this time three farmer focused social support services were observed: Mobile Crisis Services – Farm Stress Line (Saskatchewan), Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services (Manitoba), and the Farm Assistance Program (Prince Edward Island).

While each of these services differ in their organisational structure and administration, they are all underpinned by some common characteristics. The top three characteristics observed can be attributed to the success of the services and involve each of the farmer focused services being embedded in an existing service, available on an ongoing basis, and built on strong partnerships between government, non-government and industry groups.

While targeted at farmers, the services reinforced the benefits of embedding farmer specific programs in existing mainstream services. This ensures access to professional assistance for the range of issues that farmers face, on and off the farm, and appears to reduce the opportunity for duplication of services.

The availability of services to all farmers on an ongoing basis, and the partnerships that exist to provide these services are paramount to their success. This combination has developed widely recognised and respected services that are relevant to the 'real' needs of farmers and their communities and available to address issues as they arise, rather than being triggered by a specific hardship or circumstance.

These characteristics also reflect the findings of the national review of drought policy and the WA pilot, and the focus of the social support element of the IGA.

In progressing the social support element of the IGA, opportunities to enhance social support service delivery through enhanced coordination, building and maintaining partnerships, and embedding farmer focused support in established services could be considered. These approaches have great potential, not only to improve farmer identification of and access to services, but also provide targeted and longstanding services with relatively modest investment.

## Project objectives

The primary objective of this project was to undergo a Secretary's Development Award to observe the provision of social support services to Canadian farmers and rural communities.

Specifically, the project sought to:

- learn about the provision of social support services to farmers and rural communities in Canada
- identify the delivery models used to provide these services to Canadian farmers and rural communities
- identify the key characteristics of the social support services for farmers and rural communities
- identify the mechanisms used by these services to identify and respond to demand for social support services
- consider the feasibility of applying the observed approaches in the Australian context.

The project findings are intended to inform the social support element of National Drought Program Reform.

## Introduction

On 3 May 2013, the Australian, state and territory primary industries ministers agreed to an Intergovernmental Agreement on National Drought Program Reform (IGA). The IGA formalised the commitment of Australian, state and territory governments to support a preparedness and risk management approach to managing climate and other production risks. The new approach includes:

- the Farm Household Allowance
- promoting Farm Management Deposits and taxation measures
- a national approach to farm business training
- a coordinated, collaborative approach to the provision of social support services
- tools and technologies to inform farmer decision making.

The Department of Agriculture is tasked with coordinating the Commonwealth's response to its responsibilities under the IGA including the social support element. Background to the social support element of National Drought Program Reform is at Appendix A.

This project was undertaken to inform and complement work underway to address the social support element of reform by observing international experience in the provision of social support services to farmer and rural communities.

Canada was selected for this project due to the similarities between Canadian and Australian agriculture sectors and government structures. Further, the range of hardships faced by Canadian farmers is not dissimilar to those experienced by Australian farmers; climatic, financial and personal stress being common difficulties faced. The Canadian culture of supporting farmers and farming communities also provided an opportunity for comparison and learning. A comparison table outlining similarities and differences between the two countries is at Appendix B.

The project was undertaken in September 2013 and involved a two week study tour in Canada. Meetings were held with a range of Canadian stakeholders that provide social support services to farmers and rural

communities across five provinces; British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Prince Edward Island. Stakeholder groups consulted included government departments, non-government and community organisations, farmers and agriculture industry groups. A list of consultations is at Appendix C.

Similar to Australia, there is a range of government funded social support services available in Canada. A difference appears to lie in the ongoing services available specifically for the farming population. In particular, the involvement of agriculture departments in partnership with other interested groups (i.e. industry groups or health departments) is of particular interest.

This report draws on the face-to-face consultations held in Canada but focuses on the following farmer specific social support services that were observed in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island:

- Mobile Crisis Services – Farm Stress Line (Saskatchewan)
- Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services (Manitoba)
- Farm Assistance Program (Prince Edward Island).

The report describes these initiatives, outlines how they assist farmers and rural communities to identify and access social support, and highlights key characteristics that appear to underpin their success.

## **Stress and help seeking behaviours of Canadian farmers**

Farm stress and resilience studies conducted in Canada have highlighted the range of stresses faced by Canadian farmers (Kubik 1996; Western Opinion Research 2005) including:

- financial stress – debt, commodity prices, input costs and uncertain markets
- working conditions – work load, long hours, time pressures and isolation
- family and interpersonal relationships – family concerns and conflicts, succession planning and intergenerational issues
- health – sleep deprivation, illness, depression and anxiety.

The experiences of the Canadian stakeholders consulted for this project reflect the stresses identified in these studies.

A national stress and mental health survey of Canadian farmers (1100 surveys completed), conducted in 2005, found that while two-thirds of farmers were feeling stressed on their farms, only 17 per cent across Canada had spoken with a healthcare professional about stress and mental health (Western Opinion Research 2005). Discussions with stakeholders during this project confirmed these findings and provided insight to the reasons behind them, including:

- the traditional, proud and independent nature of farmers making them a reluctant cohort to seek help
- the stigma associated with seeking assistance and accessing social support services
- declining outreach services, and the more generic nature of social support services, in regional areas making it difficult for farmers to access support for their specific needs
- low level of awareness in farming communities of, and capacity to recognise, signs and symptoms of stress and mental health issues.

These observations were also identified in the national survey. In particular, 41 per cent of farmers indicated pride and independence, 9 percent noted embarrassment/stigma and 7 per cent

availability/access as their main reasons for not seeking help. Only 44 per cent of farmers indicated that they were aware of resources to assist with stress and mental health.

The national stress and mental health survey also identified who farmers prefer to seek assistance from. It found that larger numbers of farmers would seek help from a doctor (36 per cent), professional (13 per cent) or religious figure (12 per cent) ahead of a sibling, spouse or friend (7 per cent respectively), stress counsellor (6 per cent) or other farmers (3 per cent) (Western Opinion Research 2005). This finding may reflect the preference of 46 per cent of farmers to remain anonymous when seeking help, as well as the barriers identified above.

The majority of farmers surveyed (65 per cent) indicated a preference to talk one-on-one with someone as opposed to group sessions (17 per cent) or telephone assistance (10 per cent). Further, while 57 per cent were not concerned with talking to someone local about stress and mental health, 92 per cent placed significant importance on that person having an understanding of agriculture (Western Opinion Research 2005).

The survey report clarified the importance of telephone counselling despite only 10 per cent of farmers preferring this form of assistance. It noted that telephone counselling provides ready assistance to farmers in remote areas, is not inhibited by an individual's financial circumstance, provides one-on-one counselling and is preferred by farmers experiencing moderate or high levels of stress (Western Opinion Research 2005).

## **Social support services for Canadian farmers and rural communities**

Farmer specific social support services were observed in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island. These services are available provincially to farmers and rural people to support them with farm related and personal stress.

The services observed address the range of stresses Canadian farmers face. To do this each service has, in different ways, considered and addressed the barriers that inhibit farmers seeking and accessing assistance, as well as farmer preferences for service delivery.

### **Mobile Crisis Services – Farm Stress Line (Saskatchewan)**

Mobile Crisis Services is based in Regina, Saskatchewan. It provides 24 hour social and health crisis response and emergency intervention services to the community. The delivery model for this service has been very successful and adopted by various other services in Saskatchewan, other Canadian provinces, and the United States (Mobile Crisis n.d.).

Recognising that people in crisis may need various other services to assist them, Mobile Crisis Services works in partnership with a number of other organisations and government agencies to ensure those services are made available. Partnerships, via funding streams and referral services, exist with government agencies, Regina's police, fire and protective services, mental health services, Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority and United Way Regina (a not for profit organisation) (Mobile Crisis n.d.).

The range of services provided by Mobile Crisis Services include child welfare, emergency financial assistance, mental health and counselling services, substance abuse and domestic violence counselling, a problem gambling helpline and the Farm Stress Line (Mobile Crisis n.d.).

## Farm Stress line

The Farm Stress Line is a dual purpose phone line designated to respond to the needs of Saskatchewan farmers and rural people. It is administered and delivered by Mobile Crisis Services with funding from the Ministry of Agriculture. It provides a free 1800-number for farmers to access confidential telephone counselling, support, information, and referral services for personal and production issues.

The social support services, which are the primary functions of the stress line, assist with issues including debt, safety, succession or personal issues, health and/or addictions (Mobile Crisis Service 2013). Callers seeking agricultural or production advice are referred to the relevant areas of the Ministry of Agriculture using a map of agriculture advisors across the province.

Recognising the range of issues faced by farmers (production and personal), and the potential benefits of a farmer specific phone line to assist, the Farm Stress Line was initiated, funded and resourced by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture's Agriculture Knowledge Centre in 1989. Originally the centre provided agriculture information and advice to farmers, ranchers and the agriculture industry on a range of topics including crop and livestock production, research and technology, government programs and services, and farm business management (Government of Saskatchewan 2013). Integration of the Farm Stress Line into the knowledge centre provided one line for farmers to seek production advice and/or personal counselling. Ministry staff servicing the phone line had expertise in various agricultural fields as well as training to assist farmers to solve personal problems and direct them to resources.

In 2009, staffing resources for the Farm Stress Line were reduced from 26 to 4 people. A further reduction to two and a half full time employees (costing approximately \$124 812 Australian dollars for staff alone) reflected the small number of calls being taken by the stress line; on average, two calls per day.

In 2012 the Farm Stress Line was contracted to Mobile Crisis Services. Key drivers for division of the Agriculture Knowledge Centre and the stress line included the:

- low call numbers coupled with a high volume of repeat callers who did not appear to be getting the help they required
- staffing costs for the limited use of the service
- restricted operating hours, 8am—9pm Monday to Friday excluding public holidays, creating a barrier for farmers accessing the service when they needed it.

The stress line continues to be promoted, supported and funded by the Ministry of Agriculture. Funding for 2013 was approximately \$17 361 (Australian dollars). In its first year within Mobile Crisis Services (July 2012 to June 2013), counsellors responded to 173 calls. These calls addressed emotional issues, financial problems, mental health, substance abuse, and family violence (Mobile Crisis Service 2013).

## Key characteristics of the service

From discussions with Mobile Crisis Services and the Ministry of Agriculture, it appears that the integration of the Farm Stress Line into Mobile Crisis Services has proven to be successful from an economic and social perspective. This success appears to be underpinned by the following characteristics:

- it is embedded in an existing service with support and investment from government
- it is a phone line that is accessible to regional and remote farmers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week

- it is a dual purpose phone line to provide social support services and referrals to agriculture production experts.

Mobile Crisis Services has received less funding from the ministry than what was required previously with no obvious impact on the delivery of the service. In fact, Mobile Crisis Services is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and continues to deliver the complete Farm Stress Line service; the social support element and the referral service to agriculture and production specialists. It is expected that these differences alone will help capture farmers and rural clients that would have been missed under the previous delivery arrangements. Specifically the opening hours will accommodate the working patterns of farmers, who are often out of the office during 'normal' business hours.

While Ministry of Agriculture staff were trained to deliver social support through the Farm Stress Line, embedding the service in a specialised crisis service has been beneficial. Since the Farm Stress Line is one in a range of support services delivered by Mobile Crisis Services, the staff are professional counsellors with extensive training and experience handling a range of situations. Embedding the stress line in this service not only provides a professional level of counselling but also provides a single access point to a broad range of assistance for the range of issues that farmers may face. In addition, the service has connections and existing networks with other service providers to facilitate appropriate and effective referrals as required.

### **Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services (Manitoba)**

Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services (MFRSS) is based in Brandon, Manitoba. MFRSS is funded by Manitoba Health in cooperation with Manitoba Agriculture (in-kind support) to provide free and confidential information, support and counselling to farm families and rural Manitobans. It is administered by Klinik Community Health Centre which is an accredited crisis centre and member of the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention. Klinik counselling services include crisis counselling, post trauma counselling, Manitoba Suicide Line, drop-in counselling and MFRSS (Klinik Community Health Centre n.d.).

MFRSS began in December 2000 to assist farmers and people from rural communities with issues such as relationship stress, depression, anxiety, domestic violence, addictions and suicide. It is open Monday to Friday, 10am—9pm. Since 2001, call numbers have grown from 481 to 1720 in 2013 with calls peaking in 2010 at 2444 calls (MFRSS 2012). This increase in calls over time has been attributed to increased awareness of MFRSS, increased farm and rural stress, and a reduced stigma associated with seeking services (MFRSS 2011).

Acknowledging farmers and rural people benefit from specialised mental health services provided by professionals that understand agriculture, MFRSS counsellors are required to be certified crisis workers with farming backgrounds. Similarly, volunteers can only provide crisis counselling for MFRSS if they have a farming background (MFRSS 2011).

MFRSS provides a range of services and access points to these services. In addition to the phone line, MFRSS has recently started offering online counselling through an email helpline and online chat service. Other services include a resource centre, suicide bereavement group, and public education and outreach activities including workshops and Farmer-to-Farmer information and support groups (MFRSS n.d.).

### **Farmer-to-Farmer**

Farmer-to-Farmer provides a series of workshops on farming, stress and depression. These workshops are targeted at farmers and their families, and agricultural service providers including government officers,

financial lenders and advisors, equipment dealers and other salespeople (MFRSS 2011). The objectives of these workshops are to:

- increase awareness among producers about signs of stress, depression and suicide
- increase awareness about ways to reduce stress and achieve mental health while reducing stigma related to seeking mental health support
- educate agricultural service providers about signs of stress and how to connect farmers with helping resources
- increase knowledge of community mental health resources
- increase mental health help-seeking behaviours among farmers
- promote health coping strategies of farmers, including building support networks.

This initiative was piloted in 2010 with funding from Brandon and Area United Way. The pilot's success and continuation demonstrates the need and demand for ongoing education about stress management and mental health for farmers.

### Key characteristics of the service

The tour of the MFRSS office and the meetings held with stakeholders in Brandon and surrounds highlighted the success of the service in Brandon, and Manitoba more broadly. This success appears to be underpinned by the following service characteristics:

- the counsellors are professionally trained and have agricultural/farming experience
- it provides a range of services with a variety of access points to these services
- it has a community presence, strong networks and conducts outreach activities
- it is embedded in an existing service with support and investment from government.

The requirement for all MFRSS counsellors to be farmers or have a farming background is a valued element of the service. This characteristic is supported by the findings of the national stress and mental health survey of Canadian farmers and MFRSS' counsellors. Counsellors explained that many farmers who call want to know if the counsellor themselves is a farmer before they are willing to discuss the purpose for their call. Counsellors have found their farming experience and mutual understanding of farming life helps them build rapport more quickly, gain trust and increase their capacity to assist farmers with their problems.

The combination of phone, online and face-to-face counselling, outreach activities, and presence on social media, accommodates the range of farmer preferences when accessing social support services. While the service is not open 24 hours a day, the variety of access points enables farmers to initiate contact at a time that is convenient for them.

MFRSS has a strong community presence and wide recognition in the province. In addition to the support it provides to the community through services such as the suicide bereavement group and Farmer-to-Farmer workshops it is also connected with other service providers, community groups and industry stakeholders in the region. This was highlighted in the itinerary for the study tour in Brandon and surrounds which included meetings with representatives from government (health and agriculture), non-government service providers (counselling services and farm family coach), non-government organisations (Manitoba Women's Institute) and local farmers and their families.

Similar to the Mobile Crisis Unit, embedding MFRSS into existing infrastructure (Klinik Community Health Centre) is beneficial to the service; enabling MFRSS to focus on service delivery to the community with

support from its administrator. As with Mobile Crisis Services, this arrangement ensures counsellors are equipped with experience and training to handle a range of circumstances and are supported by their local (Brandon) and organisational (Klinic) networks.

## Farm Assistance Program (Prince Edward Island)

Prince Edward Island's Farm Assistance Program is the only program of its kind for farmers in Canada. It was initiated in late 2004 to provide confidential counselling services to farmers and their families.

Counselling services are provided by Atlantic Employee Assistance Providers and jointly funded (50:50) by the Prince Edward Island Federation of Agriculture (PEIFA) and the island's Department of Agriculture and Forestry. While relatively consistent, funding levels for the program are not fixed and have ranged between \$10 150 and \$30 451 (estimated Australian dollars) from 2004 to 2012. Total funding over the last nine years has equated to approximately \$126 576 (Australian dollars); an average of \$14 064 per year. Over this time the service has conducted 998 sessions for farm families and workers.

The program is serviced by three professional counsellors with experience and training in social work and psychology. They provide counselling on a wide range of issues irrespective of their relationship to the farm business including stress and anxiety, bereavement, family and parenting matters, career counselling and depression. Program data indicates that the major presenting problems addressed by the service include farm family relationships, marital issues, family (child/adolescent), mental health (anxiety, depression), physical health, and career burnout/life stage/retirement.

The Farm Assistance Program is available to all farmers and their families on the island. All counselling session costs, which range from around \$72 – \$103 (estimated Australian dollars), are subsidised; 100 per cent for PEIFA members and their families and 50 per cent for all other island farmers. Fishers and foresters are not able to access this program.

### Key characteristics of the service

While the small size of Prince Edward Island lends itself to successful delivery of the Farm Assistance Program, meetings with PEIFA, the Department of Agriculture and Forestry and the service provider highlighted characteristics that underpin this success. These characteristics include:

- the availability of the service to all farmers as well as their families, with capacity to provide one-on-one counselling
- leadership, investment and promotion by the peak agriculture association on the island
- the strong partnership between government, industry and the service provider
- the program is embedded in an existing service with support and investment from government and industry.

The availability of the program to all farmers with a minimum 50 per cent government subsidy ensures all farmers, irrespective of their individual circumstance, are assisted to access the service. This appears to have resulted in a program that is widely acknowledged, respected and utilised across the island.

Ongoing support from the program partners (PEIFA, the department and the service provide) and its administrative arrangements are important elements of the program. While the program is promoted and jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture and Forestry and the PEIFA neither are involved in the administration or implementation of the program. Reporting on the program's activities, from the service provider, to the PEIFA and the department are high level and focused on total numbers of clients and the cost of the program; no client details are provided to either of the funding bodies. This structure ensures

the trust of farmers in the program, which appears to increase with the removal of direct government, and to a degree, federation involvement.

Similar to the other farmer specific programs observed, embedding the farmer specific assistance into an existing service has multiple benefits. Importantly, it ensures that farmers are being assisted by professionals with the appropriate training and experience to handle a range of circumstances. The wide range of issues that can be addressed through the Farm Assistance Program also ensures that farmers, and their families, can be supported through a range of circumstances, irrespective of their origin (farm issues or broader).

## **Key observations – characteristics underpinning the success of farmer focused social support services**

Each of the services observed differs in its general approach, organisational structure and resourcing, however, common characteristics also exist between them. In discussions with the service providers, and the broader consultations held, it is apparent that the success of the three services is underpinned by the following characteristics.

### **Embedding farmer focused services into existing services**

Embedding farmer focused assistance into existing services has many benefits for farmer clients and the service providers. Benefits include, but are not limited to:

- availability of counsellors with experience and training to handle a wide range of issues
- using counsellors' existing professional networks to facilitate referrals where necessary
- working within existing infrastructure and governance arrangements to facilitate provision of consistent service delivery to clients and economic benefits for the provider/funder.

While embedded in existing services, each of the farmer focused services observed has a clear 'hook' for its farmer clients to encourage them to use the service. In addition to the service title referring to farmers and farming, and dedicated phone lines, these 'hooks' include:

- the Mobile Crisis Services – Farm Stress Line provides social support and also performs referrals to agricultural production specialists for callers seeking that type of assistance
- MFRSS is known to have counsellors that are required to be farmers themselves or have a background in farming and also facilitates farmer specific support services such as Farmer-to-Farmer
- The Farm Assistance Program is actively supported and promoted by the province's peak agriculture industry body and is available to all farmers and their families.

While access to these services is driven by an individual's need for assistance, the identified 'hooks' act to remove some of the barriers to farmers accessing the services. For example, given the negative stigma around accessing counselling and other support services in rural Canada, the dual purpose for the Mobile Crisis Services – Farm Stress Line allows farmers in need to call under the guise of seeking production advice.

### **Availability of services for all farmers on an ongoing basis**

The availability of services to assist farmers with issues as they appear is attributed to greater resilience when faced with other challenges. Family and interpersonal relationships are key stresses for farmers, and

an example of increased resilience can be seen in farm succession planning. The meeting with the farm family coach/farmer in Manitoba highlighted the link between succession planning (preparedness) and long term resilience. She noted that the farm families which have a clear plan for their business and manage risk well are the most resilient when faced with unexpected pressures.

While differing in their operating hours, the ongoing availability of the three services observed for all farmers, not just during periods of hardship, is a key characteristic underpinning their success. This availability accounts for the range of hardships faced by farmers, not only related to their farm business but in everyday life.

## **Government, non-government and industry partnerships**

Discussions with representatives from United Way emphasised the importance of government leadership, intergovernmental partnerships and local intelligence to the success of social support initiatives. They noted successful Canadian initiatives, such as Canada's National Homelessness Strategy, have been underpinned by federal leadership, cost-sharing arrangements between all levels of government, and on-ground intelligence from municipal governments.

Each of the farmer specific services observed during this project demonstrated valuable and successful partnerships within their respective provinces; between government, non-government and/or industry groups. While funding is primarily drawn from provincial government departments, investment (resources and/or in-kind) from the agriculture portfolios has been important in driving support specifically for farmers and people in rural communities. This support, coupled with delivery and input from non-government service providers and industry groups has ensured service delivery applicable to the targeted clientele.

Overall these partnerships have enabled farmer specific initiatives to be embedded within existing services. This has reduced the risk of duplication of services while ensuring farmers have specific access to professional and ongoing support.

## **Feasibility of farmer focused social support services in the Australian context**

A range of mainstream services is available in Australia to support individuals with emotional and mental health issues. In addition, there is growing recognition of the importance of emotional and mental health and the impact of this on farmers and their families, as well as their businesses and communities. While some services have a farming focus, these appear to be primarily web-based information services which link to mainstream stress lines such as Lifeline and MensLine Australia.

Examples of initiatives that have worked well in rural communities to provide social support include sport clubs, rural fire services and Men's Sheds. While not providers of social support in the traditional sense, or farmer focused, these organisations promote social interaction and form hubs for communities during periods of hardship, such as drought and natural disaster.

In relation to farmer focused services, although not trained to provide social counselling, Rural Financial Counsellors are recognising the difficulties they face to adequately address clients' financial situations before their emotional and mental health issues have been addressed. Consequently, there is increasing interest from the Rural Financial Counselling Services (RFCS) to integrate social counselling into the service. This approach has been trialled successfully in one of the Victorian services but has not been adopted more broadly.

Key observations from the study tour of Canada have demonstrated the characteristics that underpin the success and longevity of farmer focused social support services, and the positive impacts they have on individuals and the agriculture sector, at relatively low cost. While these services have been institutionalised, similar approaches in Australia are in their infancy, are small scale, and their success can often be attributed to the drive and passion of individuals and small groups. Nevertheless, their success demonstrates the feasibility of such farmer and rural focused services in the Australian context.

The Department of Agriculture is not responsible for social policy, however, there are opportunities for it to encourage development of effective, low cost and ongoing farmer focused social support services; for example, through the RFCS and the new Farm Household Allowance. Learning from the Canadian experience, these opportunities are worth exploring to support healthy, productive and resilient farmers, farming families and rural communities.

## Conclusion

It should not be assumed that the stresses faced by Canadian farmers are greatly different to those experienced by the broader population. However, there is strong evidence to support targeted social support services that account for the typical help seeking behaviour, and barriers to seeking assistance for personal issues, of this cohort. The Australian Government Department of Agriculture's (2013) recent project on social support services for farmers in regional Victoria highlighted similar characteristics in Australian farmers. Given these similarities, the range of stresses that Australian farmers face, and the services trialled in Australia to date, it is reasonable to conclude that targeted services for Australian farmers would be beneficial for individuals and the sector.

This project has highlighted key characteristics that underpin the success of the three farmer specific services observed. The top three characteristics observed were:

- embedded services – embedding farmer specific initiatives in mainstream services with the inclusion of a relevant 'hook' to engage farmers
- ongoing availability – ensuring services are available to all farmers at all times to assist as issues arise and increase overall resilience and preparedness
- partnerships – underpinning relevant and accessible services with strong collaboration and cooperation between government, non-government and industry groups.

The key observations of this project reflect findings of the national review of drought policy, the WA pilot review and subsequently support the Commonwealth's approach to National Drought Program Reform, to enhance coordination and collaboration of social services. It has also demonstrated the need for and benefits of farmer specific social support services and the ability to provide these with relatively modest investment. In particular, it has highlighted key characteristics that have underpinned the success of such services. These characteristics, in addition to the broader lessons learnt from the Canadian experience, present a strong base for consideration of similar services in the Australian context.

## Appendices

### Appendix A      **Background to the social support element of National Drought Program Reform**

The 2008–09 national review of drought policy found that droughts have a significant negative impact on the mental wellbeing of farm families and the social fabric of rural communities. It found that governments and non-government organisations must move away from crisis-framed responses and adopt more long-term, sustainable approaches to deliver support services in rural Australia.

In response to the findings of the national review of drought policy, the Commonwealth and Western Australian governments agreed to conduct a pilot of drought reform measures in part of Western Australia (WA pilot). The WA pilot trialled a successful social support program—the Farm Social Support program.

The Farm Social Support program delivered enhanced and better coordinated social support services to farmers and rural communities in the pilot region. In 2011, a review of the WA pilot highlighted the following key points:

- social support services should be available to rural communities at all times, not just in times of crisis
- embedding mental health, counselling and referral services with other community services and at community events should increase people’s confidence in accessing them
- the outreach model used in the pilot—providing services to farmers in their home, workplace or other local venue—is integral to the successful delivery of social support services in rural communities
- delivery agencies should continue to improve communication and coordination across the range of social support services provided.

In May 2013, the Australian, state and territory primary industries ministers agreed to an Intergovernmental Agreement on National Drought Program Reform (IGA). Acknowledging the findings of the national review of drought policy and the WA pilot review, the new approach under the IGA includes a coordinated, collaborative approach to the provision of social support services.

## Appendix B

### Comparison table outlining similarities and differences between Australia and Canada

Characteristic	Australia	Canada (Department of Agriculture 2013)
Population size	23.03 million (ABS 2013)	34.4 million
% of population in agriculture/employed in agriculture	1.2% (ABARES 2013; ABS 2013) <sup>1</sup>	2%
Primary industry sectors	Crops – wheat, other crops Dairy Fisheries Horticulture – fruit, nuts, vegetables Poultry and eggs Meat and livestock – beef, veal, sheep and lambs, pigs Wine grapes Fibre – cotton, wool Sugar (DAFF 2012)	Crops – oilseeds, cereals and grains, pulses and special crops (e.g. buckwheat, forages, sunflower seed) Dairy Fish and seafood Horticulture – fruit, vegetables, honey, maple products Poultry and eggs Red meat and livestock – hogs, cattle, sheep and lambs, goats, bison Organic products
% of agricultural land	59% (DAFF 2012)	7.4%
Number of farms	135 650 (ABS 2012)	205 730 (AAFC 2013)
Average farm size	3020 hectares (ABS 2012)	315 hectares (AAFC 2013)
% contribution to GDP from agriculture	2.4% (DAFF 2012)	1.7% (AAFC 2013)
Government structure	Commonwealth country Head of state represented by the Governor General Federal, state/territory and local governments	Commonwealth country Head of state represented by the Governor General Federal, provincial and municipal governments

<sup>1</sup> Figure calculated from data obtained from both these sources.

## Appendix C Consultation list

Stakeholders	Organisation category	Date	Location
United Way of Greater Victoria	Non-government organisation	16 September 2013	Teleconference
British Columbia Ministry of Health	Provincial government	16 September 2013	Teleconference
Mobile Crisis Services	Non-government service provider	17 September 2013	Regina, Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture	Provincial government	17 September 2013	Regina, Saskatchewan
Canadian Mental health Association, Saskatchewan Division	Non-government organisation	17 September 2013	Regina, Saskatchewan
Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services	Provincial government	18 September 2013	Brandon, Manitoba
Mobile Crisis Unit – Crisis Stabilisation Unit	Provincial government	18 September 2013	Brandon, Manitoba
The Counselling Centre	Non-government service provider	18 September 2013	Brandon, Manitoba
Centre for Adult Psychiatry	Provincial government	18 September 2013	Brandon, Manitoba
Manitoba Women’s Institute	Non-government organisation	19 September 2013	Brandon, Manitoba
Farm family couch/ farmer	Non-government service provider	19 September 2013	Boissevain, Manitoba
Farm family	Farmer – cropping	19 September 2013	Deloraine, Manitoba
Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives	Provincial government	19 September 2013	Deloraine, Manitoba
Canadian Federation of Agriculture	Non-government organisation	20 September 2013	Ottawa, Ontario
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada	Federal government	23 September 2013	Ottawa, Ontario
Farm Assistance Program	Non-government service provider Industry organisation Provincial government	24 September 2013	Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

Farm family	Farmer – potato	24 September 2013	Mount Tryon, Prince Edward Island
Farm family	Farmer – dairy	24 September 2013	New Glasgow, Prince Edward Island
Catholic Family Services Bureau	Non-government service provide	24 September 2013	Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island
United Way Centraide Canada	Non-government organisation	26 September 2013	Teleconference

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