

EMERGENT RESOLUTION E1-19
ACCESS TO AGRICULTURE-SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

- WHEREAS** Agriculture is economically essential, both provincially and federally, and agriculture needs healthy farmers to function;
- WHEREAS** Agriculture is a stressful occupation, which has become especially clear with three consecutive years of poor harvests, livestock feed shortages and other effects of climate change;
- WHEREAS** Despite mental illness diagnoses increasing, a large stigma exists around mental illness and asking for help which is especially prominent in industries like agriculture where members are isolated and have a distinct workplace culture of not requesting help;
- WHEREAS** Alberta does not have an agriculture-specific mental health crisis line, although neighbouring provinces do (e.g. Saskatchewan);
- WHEREAS** 310-FARM is a well-known and commonly utilized number that can direct callers to an abundance of resources, but only offers agronomic information during office hours;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED
THAT ALBERTA’S AGRICULTURAL SERVICE BOARDS REQUEST

That the Provincial Government of Alberta facilitates the formation of a free, year-round, all hours, mental health crisis hotline, dedicated to the agriculture industry, providing farmers with direct access to uniquely qualified professionals and resources, whom have both an understanding of mental health issues and agriculture-specific stresses.

FURTHER THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED
THAT ALBERTA’S AGRICULTURAL SERVICE BOARDS REQUEST

That the Provincial Government of Alberta secure long term, sustainable funding for the operation and maintenance of this mental health crisis hotline.

SPONSORED BY: Lac Ste. Anne County

MOVED BY: _____

SECONDED BY: _____

CARRIED: _____

DEFEATED: _____

STATUS: Provincial

DEPARTMENT: Agriculture and Forestry

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Agriculture is economically essential

The foundation of Alberta's economy rests on petroleum and agriculture (Mansell & Percy, 1990). Put as simply as possible, we have seen historical slumps and peaks because of the weight placed on these industries. Therefore, when world oil supply increases, our oil prices drop, and the economy slows. Provincially this impact can be mitigated when the agriculture industry remains strong; however, poor weather conditions locally or world market trends can impact prices and exports here (Mansell & Percy, 1990). Canada is vulnerable to world market trends as we are a net-exporter of the agricultural goods we produce. Our largest market is the United States, which accounts for 38% of total agri-food exports, followed in order by China, Japan, and Mexico (AAF, 2017).

According to AAF, (2017), Alberta's real gross domestic product for agri-food industries is up 2.5% at \$6.5 billion, and Alberta exports of primary and processed agri-products reached a record of \$11.2 billion. Food and beverage manufacturing sales reached \$14.4 billion – a new high. Generally, both farm income and expenditures are increasing. Naturally Alberta continues to be the largest beef producer of the provinces, accounting for 41% of all cattle in Canada. Nationally, 75.7% of beef processing occurs in Western Canada; the majority of that is focussed in Alberta specifically.

Canada-wide, agriculture's impact is smaller but still substantial. According to Agriculture Canada, (2017), the agriculture industry generated \$111.9 billion of gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for 6.7% of Canada's total GDP. Agriculture's GDP grew by 11%, compared to the Canadian economy growing by 7.8%. Approximately 2.3 million people were employed within the agriculture industry, accounting for 12.5% of Canadian employment (Agriculture Canada, 2017). Agricultural sales and farm incomes are at record highs, and Canada remains as one of the world's largest exporters of agricultural commodities. Grocery store sales, commercial foodservices sales, and employment in those sectors has increased. Farm market receipts for primary agriculture remained at record highs and net operating expenses dropped for the first time in six years (Agriculture Canada, 2017).

Agriculture is stressful

According to Fraser *et al.*, (2005), farming has one of the highest rates of suicide across all industries and is associated with a unique set of characteristics that can be hazardous to mental health. Included are things such as difficult physical environments/weather, farm-family-business structure, economic difficulties, and many more. Physical and mental health are distinct entities, but often have related effects; farming is a physically dangerous occupation which innately causes stress to workers. Many work activities have inherent risks involved, with large moving equipment, large livestock and zoonotic disease, climbing bins or buildings, or applying various chemicals (Gerrard, 1998).

To quote Fraser *et al.*, (2005):

“The physical stressors and hazards of the farm environment are compounded by the regulatory frameworks and economic dynamics of managing a farm business. Farming enterprises operate in a context of declining terms of trade for agricultural produce; volatile commodity markets; limited availability of off-farm employment; growing cost of machinery and production; loss of farm or livelihood due to crop or production failure; and changing government policy in relation to a range of economic and environmental issues (Elkind *et al.*, 1998).”

98% of farms in Alberta are family owned and operated (Ontario Farm Animal Council, 2010). Working with your family does provide support, but in a farm setting it can impose demands not seen in other industries (Weigel *et al.*, 1987). Increased conflict is seen between family members as the lines between personal and business become blurred; family problems can become work problems, and vice versa. It has been shown that these family related issues most adversely impact the younger generations. (Marotz-Baden, 1988; Weigel *et al.*, 1987). British studies completed by Thomas *et al.*, (2003), demonstrated that most farmers who reported moderate symptoms of depression were concerned with family problems. Contrastingly, other studies show that monetary issues were the predominant factor in suicide and depression; however, it is likely the interrelated nature of family, business, and money in farming that account for those contrasting results (Fraser *et al.*, 2005). Family support can provide a buffer and increase resilience in a farming community but needs to be acknowledged for its potential to simultaneously add stress.

Women in agriculture face a high level of stress, depression, and fatigue, at reportedly higher levels than men (Fraser *et al.*, 2005). This is primarily due to role conflict and high workloads. Farm women are traditionally in charge of household tasks, childcare, and running farm errands (Gallagher & Delworth, 2003), but are increasingly required to undertake more on- and off-farm work. Often this is referred to as the third shift – one shift on-farm, one shift off-farm, and one shift as a wife and mother.

As is well known and documented, farming is reliant on weather conditions, and is therefore vulnerable to extreme weather. Two snowfalls in September of an accumulated four inches of snow, that melted away within a few days, nearly derailed the Northwest Region within the province of Alberta (AFSC, 2018). Droughts throughout the rest of the province, and a cold spring lead to a feed shortage large enough to more than triple the regular cost of livestock feed. In no other industry would these relatively small weather events cause such a widespread impact. As climate change progresses, weather patterns shift, and extreme weather events occur more commonly, farmers will only continue to feel the financial strain caused by these poorly timed events.

Farming families and those living in rural communities also have several obstacles in accessing mental health care. Some of the major barriers include but are not limited to: maldistribution of health care practitioners (many are in cities, and few are located in rural areas), poor roads, long distances, heightened visibility in small towns (gossip travels quicker through 100 people than through 10,000), and lastly the notion that farmers should be self-reliant and stoic. This only serves to increase the stigma around mental illness and asking for help.

Stigma around mental health in agriculture

The stigma around mental illness is fading over time as movements like Bell Let's Talk and Do More Agriculture become more popular, but it is slower to fade within the agriculture industry. This stigma is an especially difficult obstacle for men to overcome due to the typical persona of a farming man (Phillipe *et al.*, 2017). The culture of agriculture is that – especially male – farmers are resilient, strong, stoic, relentless workers. Anecdotally, women often feel that since agriculture is a male-dominated industry, they need to perpetuate the 'toughness' that is traditionally masculine.

Historically, hegemonic studies concentrated on the fact that males have a lower sensitivity to signs of depression, reluctance to seek help, and violent expressions of distress, across all industries. This led to an understanding of male socialization having negative impacts on mental health and well-being (Gough,

2013). The fallacy in that thinking was seen and currently, there is a shift towards a balanced approach to mental health. (Roy *et al.*, 2017).

Robertson (2007) presents an old-fashioned model of norms that stress health as a feminine concern. Therefore, to follow historical masculine norms, men should not speak of their health concerns. This would additionally mean that men should cope with their problems alone, and only get external help as a last resort, or when pressured by others. To top that off, men are simultaneously expected to care for others as their protectors and providers.

Although those pressures are being alleviated with the feminism movement, it can take generations before humans will adjust their way of thinking.

As stress builds, there is a large array of symptoms that can appear in a farmer and are easily associated with other causes. Some symptoms that can be directly related to high stress include, but are not limited to: fatigue, loss or gain of appetite and weight, irritability, panic attacks, and depression (Roy, *et al.*, 2017). There is a basic recognition that stress can cause these problems, so many farmers already have coping methods that they believe to be enough. Those methods include: self distraction, cognitive strategies, and maladaptive coping methods.

Farming – especially with livestock – requires working seven days a week, and there is usually little to no geographical work/home separation giving a feeling of being on-call all the time (Roy *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, self distraction such as taking work breaks or vacations is crucial. Across the industry, the importance of breaks and vacations is recognized. Conversely, however, there is still a prevailing notion that farmers should be working all the time, since farming is so intensive. This causes a stigma towards taking those necessary breaks as being a ‘lazy’ farmer. Unfortunately, this social pressure is often exerted more by fellow farmers than other parts of society (Roy *et al.*, 2017).

On top of pressure to not take vacations, the advances in technology have increased the likelihood of farmers working in isolation as less people are needed to operate the businesses. A constant frustration in agriculture is that a farmer can have great technical performance and produce a high-quality product, but this does not always lead to financial success. Therefore, many farmers combat this through cognitive strategies; basically, they use humour, positive reframing, pride, values, and long-term perspectives and strategic planning to help them survive the bad times. According to Roy *et al.*, (2017) few farmers turned to religion as a coping mechanism.

The previously mentioned mechanisms are sometimes not enough, which is why farmers need more resources to turn to, before maladaptive strategies are chosen. These include substance abuse (excessive drugs or drinking, etc.), social isolation, and suicide. Fortunately, many farmers recognize that those coping methods are detrimental in the long term and try to avoid them (Roy *et al.*, 2017).

Although the stigma around maintaining good mental health, and admitting to mental illness is fading over time, it is still heavily present, especially in male farmers (European Commission, 2011). Men often self-report their health as better than women with the same symptoms. This is consistent with the stereotype of farming men being traditionally masculine, and therefore may cause men to favour some of the negative coping methods.

Saskatchewan’s mental health link and funding model

In our neighbouring province, Saskatchewan, agriculture is also a key industry. The Farm Stress Line operates through Mobile Crisis Services, a non-profit community-based organization that is governed by a volunteer board of directors. They contribute significant time to assist in direction of programs and services (Mobile Crisis Services, 2017). In the 2014/15 fiscal year, Mobile Crisis Services responded to a total of 23,286 calls. They receive funding from seven strategic funding partners from various departments of municipal and provincial governments (from the AGM report of Mobile Crisis Services, 2017). An additional method of funding is private, tax deductible donations, either by mail, online, or in person.

Simply, the Farm Stress Line provides confidential counselling, support, information, and referral services that respond to the needs of rural individuals (Mobile Crisis Services, 2017). The Farm Stress Line is toll-free, open all hours, and promises no call display for anonymity. They help callers by clarifying problems and identifying possible solutions, connecting you with the organization or program best suited to your problem, and listening. The Crisis Counsellors are qualified to help in areas including, but not limited to: mental health, parenting, grief, youth issues, and finances.

July 2012 is when the Farm Stress Line was officially moved to the Mobile Crisis Services responsibility (AGCanada, 2018). This gave the Farm Stress Line the ability to run 'round-the-clock' and 'one-on-one.' The focus of this service was to provide stressed farmers with the listening ear of their peers, who can understand what 21st century farming feels like (AGCanada, 2018). Saskatchewan's provincial government wanted farmers and ranchers to know they can rely on those services if they need them.

Despite not being a mental health crisis line, Alberta already offers a similar platform with the program of the Ag-Info Centre: 310-FARM. This is an agriculture information line, with specifications towards crop and livestock education. They only answer inquiries during office hours, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday to Friday (AAF, 2018). However, this phone line is commonly used and well-known. Annually, 310-FARM takes up to 30,000 calls and receives 5000-6000 emails; the level of traffic is dependent on what programs are currently being offered (AAF, 2018).

Alberta does have mental health and support services available, with the most applicable option being 211. However, this is not an agriculture-specific help line, and as demonstrated previously farming has a plethora of stressors that are exclusive to agriculture; people outside of agriculture without that unique experience cannot empathize or understand a farmer or rancher's stress. Although 211 is a free service to those calling in, municipalities must pay to provide the service, and it is not offered widely throughout the province (Alberta 211, 2018). Additionally, 211 is an information and referral phone line. Although they are trained to deal with people in crisis, the focus of this phone line is to direct people to resources. In the case of farmers and those living rural, they are often directed to resources that are not present. Often there is either a wait list for the referred resource, or it can take time to have your call returned. Since 211 is not offered province wide, someone may call in but not be informed of closer resources if their municipality does not participate in the program (Alberta 211, 2018). Convincing a farmer that they need help is difficult enough already (Roy *et al.*, 2017); when they are brave enough to ask, they should receive help that is appropriate for them.

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