

Stronger Farms start with Mentally Resilient Farmers

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Rural Aid's second *Pulse of the Paddock* survey offers a vital snapshot of the emotional, social, and business wellbeing of Australian farmers. Conducted in October 2024, the survey gathered responses from 687 primary producers, including fruit and vegetable growers. It highlights the ongoing pressures on Australian farms and the opportunities to build resilience through connection, support, and education.

Perhaps the most pressing takeaway is the mental health of our farmers. A staggering 58% of respondents rated their mental health as "average or below," and 1 in 5 reported a decline in wellbeing over the past year. The statistics are sobering: suicide rates among farmers are 59% higher than the national average.

Yet many don't seek help. Over a third of those struggling said they hadn't reached out for support, often due to stigma or a reluctance to appear vulnerable. Encouragingly, this attitude is beginning to shift slowly.

The survey found that:

- 61% of farmers would now reach out for counselling support
- 75% would do so if a family member needed help
- One in three reported a more positive attitude towards accessing mental health services

Seeking support is not a sign of weakness; it's an investment in your family and farm's future

Nearly all respondents (94%) said their local community was vital for accessing essential services including health care, childcare, postal delivery, and more. But 38% said they had trouble accessing those very services.

Barriers included:

- **Isolation:** Long travel times, poor roads, high fuel costs
- **Workload:** Farming's 24/7 nature makes appointments hard to schedule
- **Shortages:** Not enough health workers or patchy phone or internet connectivity
- **Financial stress:** Uncertain income streams and low eligibility for assistance

Despite these challenges, 85% of farmers felt a strong connection to their community. Sporting clubs, local shows, and other events were named as key sources of support. For passionfruit farmers working in rural or regional zones, maintaining those community ties is not only good for mental health, it can also be a practical lifeline during tough seasons.

The report highlighted the fact that farmers are keen to improve their practices when support is available and accessible. Of those who had taken part in sustainability training, 83% made changes to their farm, and 86% saw positive results. These included improved soil and water retention; reduced input costs through better efficiency; and greater resilience to drought, floods, and pests.

This is especially relevant for passionfruit production, where perennial vines rely on healthy soil and good water management. Strong biodiversity can also support pollination and reduce chemical reliance. However, as with mental health, time and money remain key barriers to taking that next step.

Offering flexible education - such as online courses, on-farm demos, or grower-led discussion groups - could make a real difference. If you haven't considered attending one of the industry field days then perhaps that is the first step to greater industry connectivity, enhanced access to training and resources, and a sense of belonging that could be a lifeline in tough times.

Although more than half of farmers said they felt confident about reaching their goals this year, 69% admitted they felt unprepared to deal with looming threats, be it drought, market instability, or rising debt.

Farming is as demanding as it is rewarding. The *Pulse of the Paddock* shows that while the pressures are real, growers are adaptable, resourceful, and open to change.

For those growing passionfruit - often balancing the demands of vine health, climate pressure, seasonal markets, and off-farm commitments - this is a timely reminder. Stay connected. Take care of your mental health. Make time for learning, even in small steps. And use services like Rural Aid to keep you, your family, and your farm thriving through all seasons.

For support or more information, visit:
www.ruralaid.org.au