

CONFERENCE PAPER

**KICKING THE DUST: THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
OF YOUNG FARMERS IN RURAL SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

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Farming in South Australia is becoming increasingly complex. The challenges of structural adjustment, rural social and industrial change, drought, climate change and globalisation pose new and ongoing questions about what South Australian farming will look like in the future, and the level of control that farmers have in shaping that future. Particularly relevant to forming a vision for this future is the small, and often unheard, population of young farmers currently pursuing a viable, sustainable and meaningful future in farming. 'Kicking the Dust' aims to advance the needs and opinions of young farmers through documenting their perspectives about their lives, their futures and the future of farming in South Australia. The research aims to inform state and national policy makers to address the needs of young farmers and provide insight into their vision for a viable and meaningful future in farming.

Key words Young farmers, policy, agriculture, rural decline, participation.

Background

The number of farmers in South Australia is declining at a persistent rate. South Australian Farm numbers fell from 29,137 in 1968/69 to only 14,824 in 2001/02 (ABS, 2001 in SAFF, 2004). This has been attributed to the large numbers of farmers exiting the industry, and the steady decline of new farmers entering the industry. These changes have resulted in the decline of smaller rural communities and the increased movement of rural populations into larger regional centres and urban areas. These changes have been closely attributed to lower commodity prices, drought, structural adjustment, competitive global markets, declining importance of the farm sector, deregulated markets, and the rising costs of farm inputs. For the farmer, this has resulted in increased pressure to be productive, efficient and 'business minded', with many 'forced' out of the industry due to the increasing demands to remain viable (Vanclay, 2003).

The Australian Government has pursued policies of structural adjustment of the farming industry for several decades. These policies reflect neo-liberal and economic rationalist ideologies that set the terms for a competitive trade and agricultural environment that promotes self reliance, globalisation and a business approach for farms (Vanclay, 2003; Pritchard, 2005). This has resulted in support for larger holdings that can afford new technology, business management systems and efficiency, whilst utilising neo-liberalisms' natural market clearing devices to remove smaller farms from the Australian rural landscape. An unexpected outcome was the ability for many small farms to remain in the agricultural industry using a number of different strategies

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including increased borrowing, off-farm employment, reduced spending, and continuous cropping (Barr, 2002:9). However, these may only provide a short term solution for smaller farmers.

Despite the pressures of current Australian policies, a small population of young farmers has decided to choose a future in farming. Unfortunately, this group also remains a silent population with limited opportunity to influence the forces and policies that support or hinder their livelihood and future in farming. 'Kicking the Dust' explored the lives and experiences of young farmers and how this relates to public policy. The research identified policy areas that could be influenced in an effort to support young farmers to remain in the Australian farming sector.

Method

'Kicking the Dust' is a qualitative research project that utilised semi-structured interviews with young farmers in the Mid North of South Australia. This region comprises of broad acre farmers who grow a range of grains, wool and livestock. Farms ranged in size from 1000 acres to 40,000 acres with rainfall ranges from 12 inches to 24 inches per annum. Young farmers were aged 18-35 and were interviewed on their properties. The interview data was transcribed and analysed with existing literature to identify relevant policy issues for young farmers. The research was supervised by and received ethics approval from The Flinders University of South Australia.

As part of data collection for the research the participants were interviewed on a broad range of their farming experiences including: family and farming history; economics and business; education; working hours, conditions and off-farm work; stress and isolation; meaning, values, enjoyment and challenges; health and help seeking; globalisation; environmental issues and drought; technology; communication; advocacy, representation and policy; and the future of farming.

The limitations of this research include the number of participants, the lack of opportunity for the research to be expanded to other areas within the state, and the broad scope of the study which has not allowed for in depth exploration of each area. The purpose of the study was to gain a broad snapshot of young farmers' experiences in farming and to relate this to existing literature and current policy.

The Voice of Young Farmers

The following is a snapshot of some of the findings of the young farmers' research:

The meaning of being a farmer was discussed in interviews with emphasis on why they decided to be a farmer, the positive and negative aspects of farming, the 'values' related to farming, and the type of circumstances that young farmers felt that would result in them leaving the farm.

All young farmers reported coming from a generational family farm, with up to 5 generations previously working on the farm. Many farmers reported that it was their families that built and established the farms that they were currently working on. Some of these farms have experienced significant

expansion by their fathers, and some by young farmers. Farmers reported that there was a strong sense of identity, responsibility and family 'links' to the farm because of their history and the sense of 'place'. The link to their family history was also reported in their existing relationships with their family. The farm was often reported as the context that supported this family relationship due to the unique opportunities to share the environment, workplace and common goals with their nuclear family, and extended family and friends. The 'family' farm was a sense of pride for young farmers and was one of the reasons that they decided to become and remain a farmer. This sense of pride was also attributed to farmer's goals and future plans. Many farmers reported that they would like the farm to continue for future generations, but also felt a sense of fear that they could possibly be the generation that ended the generational family farm due to the recent demanding conditions of drought and high debt levels.

The reasons for becoming a farmer were closely attributed to the meaning of farming. All young farmers reported monetary gains were not the reason that they decided to become a farmer. The reasons they reported choosing to be farmers included the lifestyle, the family background, 'in my blood', 'always wanted to be a farmer', like being busy, recognising the importance of food production, the environment, enjoyed working with machinery, and a lack of meaning in other careers and locations pursued; including working in the city. A small number of young farmers reported a sense of obligation to be farmers, and that there was a guilt attached to any contemplation of not being a farmer or leaving the farm.

The nature of farm work also provided young farmers with a strong sense of meaning. Young farmers reported that decision making was shared among family members, and felt a sense of control and responsibility to help with decision making. This was also a source of some conflict between decision makers; however young farmers felt that these issues were not currently affecting the viability of the property. Young farmers reported that the everyday activities of farming including working with animals, machinery, choice of tasks they undertake, and working with the environment provided them with a strong sense of purpose. Young farmers also reported a strong sense of meaning attributed to the outcomes of their work including growing crops and producing good stock for sale.

Young farmers were also questioned about the type of circumstances in which they would consider leaving the farm. Most young farmers would consider leaving farms if there was family conflict, inability to make a living, or family relationship breakdown relating to the farm. It was reported that leaving the farm would be a last resort. Half of the farmers interviewed said that they would not leave the farm, with some mentioning not leaving unless they were in a 'wooden box'. These comments demonstrate the strong sense of commitment that is attributed to the farm. These comments were not related to mental illness or exceptional stress; rather they highlight the strong sense of meaning and commitment attributed to being a farmer.

A significant amount of literature and responses to farming stress have emphasised weather, lack of control, isolation and succession issues as causing

significant stress in farmers. Young farmers were questioned about their perception of stress, particularly around the nature of their work and the impact of isolation.

Half of young farmers reported that farming was not that stressful, and that the stress they experienced was expected. Many young farmers reported that they could not control many of the farming stressors such as weather and tried not to 'worry' about these issues too much. Other common stressors mentioned included lack of money, debt and the uncertainty of farming. Many young farmers reported work related stress including trying to manage and organise the number of tasks that need to be undertaken on the farm due to the multi-skilled nature of being a farmer. All farmers reported feeling a sense of stress at busy times of the year such as shearing, harvest and seeding. There were also some reports of stress associated with families, particularly with fathers and closely associated family members. A number of young farmers reported the lack of control over commodity prices and lack of influence over globalisation as a stressor.

Most young farmers reported that they did not feel isolated. Those young farmers that did feel isolated said that they could accept this as part of the reality of modern day farming. Young farmers reported having developed social networks in surrounding communities and the type of social networks and outlets that farmers reported participating in included sport, pubs, and time spent with family and friends.

A majority of young farmers reported working between 60-70 hours per week with some farmers sometimes working in excess of 100 hours a week on a regular basis. A majority of young farmers work off farm to supplement the farm income including contracting for other farmers, shearing shed work, and tourism. A majority of young farmers reported that their partners also worked off farm to provide additional income.

All young farmers reported that they had someone to talk to if they were feeling stressed. A majority of young farmers reported being married or are currently in a long term relationship. They reported that this partner was their main emotional support. A majority of young farmers mentioned that they talked to their parents and brothers and sisters. A number of young farmers reported that their mother was often a primary support when they were feeling stressed. Friendships and social support networks were also identified as important supports for farmers.

Most young farmers have discussed succession/inheritance with family. Most young farmers feel confident that succession is sorted out or is in the process of being sorted out. A small portion of young farmers utilised professional assistance for succession, but reported that these services were not able to effectively manage the family, legal and policy difficulties related to succession. There is a fear in young farmers around losing their livelihood and having to pay out siblings for the farm if conflict could not be resolved. Many reported difficulty in expanding the farm as there is no money available for further expansion and consolidation due to succession issues and the high costs involved with paying out other family members for part of the farm.

The information gained in the research on stress, isolation and social

supports demonstrates that the most important support for young farmers come from their naturally occurring social relationships including partners, family and friends. Most farmers reported that these supports were preferred over professional support services as they were accessible and meaningful. All farmers found comfort in the environment and in the sense of “place” that the farm was not only somewhere they made a living but somewhere they also enjoyed living and relaxing. The main stressors that were acknowledged by farmers were related to things that they perceived as beyond their control. These stressors included the weather, commodity prices, globalisation and some of the relationships that they had with families. There was also some stress associated with the future uncertainty of their viability and their ability to expand. Despite the significant stressors in farming, all young farmers reported that ‘being a farmer’ positively outweighed all of these issues.

Young farmers reported that they felt optimistic about the future of farming. There were some concerns raised by young farmers including the need for more consistent commodity prices to improve viability, the effects of climate and climate change, and the pressure to move away from cropping to livestock due to the high input costs involved in cropping. Many young farmers reported some concern around pressure to move away from the ‘family’ farm to a more business model of farming. Young farmers expressed that they were trying their best to be experts in their many fields, but felt that the demands of markets, commodity prices, globalisation, North American and European Union subsidies, and the inconsistency of these issues made planning and future development of their farms difficult. There were also concerns raised around a loss in farming population due to the rural decline and the subsequent decline in farming culture. This is also a reflection of farms getting larger and the changing emphasis on industries other than farming such as mining, tourism, forestry, wind farms and other farming diversification.

Young farmers reported that the drought resulted in decreased yields affecting their viability and sustainability due to the frequent and ongoing droughts, especially the last 3-5 years. Young farmers in the north of the study area reported higher impacts of drought due to their frequency. However, the decreased yields have been partially offset by recent higher prices for grain and meat sheep. Young farmers are also affected by decreased income which affects their opportunity for consolidation, expansion and debt reduction. There were also reports that drought substantially increases the workload including hand feeding stock and significant increased costs of purchasing hay and grain for feeding stock. Many farmers were concerned about the lack of water due to dams not filling over the last few winters and this would result in extra costs and increased workload to cart water for stock and households. Whilst drought has been a significant challenge for young farmers, they remained positive about farming. Many young farmers were receiving Exceptional circumstances payments, interest rate subsidies or many were in the process of applying for assistance or at least finding out how to apply for this assistance.

All young farmers participating in the research have participated in a

number of formal qualifications including certificates in Agriculture or business with a number of education providers including Technical Colleges and Universities. Many young farmers reported the value of lifelong learning, as well as the importance of learning through experience. When questioned about their education needs young farmers reported the need for shorter courses at more convenient times. The particular areas that farmers reported as needs for further education were grain marketing and computing skills. All young farmers had received substantial education not only in agriculture but also in business skills and other technical areas for example managing complex machinery.

All young farmers were aware of environmental issues and were all practicing some form of environmental conservation including tree planting, no tillage, direct drilling, cell grazing, rotational grazing, minimising chemical use, contour banks and planting salt bush to manage salinity. Young farmers realise the importance of environmental practices to promote the sustainability of their property and were positive about their role as caretakers of the environment.

Most young farmers reported that they felt powerless to influence decision makers in agriculture. All young farmers reported being unhappy with current farming organisations representing them and they felt there was a need to represent the collective voice of young farmers. Young farmers were unsure about how to go about representing themselves effectively. Many young farmers felt unsupported by many of the current Government policies relating to their future.

Young farmers were able to describe in detail the complex effects of globalisation on their viability. Some of the issues raised included global marketing and trade inequities and fluctuating global demand for commodities. Some young farmers were involved with marketing their products overseas and felt that this may provide some opportunities in the future. Many young farmers also recognised globalisation as having an impact on fertiliser and fuel prices. Young farmers had a good grasp on the issues surrounding globalisation which is a reflection of the participation they have with many of their commodities traded in the global environment (Kicking the Dust Analysis, 2007).

The Public Policy Maze

Young farmers reported that public policy was a maze to them. They were unable to clearly identify public policy that affected their farming circumstances. This is a reflection of the complexity of policy making in agriculture, and the lack of opportunity for participation of young farmers in the policy process. The peak Australian and state representative bodies for farmers are the National Farmers Federation and the South Australian Farmers Federation. Young farmers reported that they were aware of these organisations, however, all but one were not members due to the cost of membership to these organisations and dissatisfaction with the lack of engagement, advocacy and representation of farmers interest. A barrier to young farmers engaging their ideas in the policy process is that policy is made

within government departments by ministers, public servants and lobby groups that do not consult adequately with young farmers. Most consultation and policy influence in Australian agriculture is dominated by older generation farmers between the ages of 50 and 70 years; the age group for the majority of farmers.

Policy Implications

For the past 30 years Australian Agricultural policy has been dominated by neo-liberal political rationality. Neo-liberalism aimed to increase the sustainability, stability and competitiveness of the Australian agricultural industry, particularly in a global environment (Halpin & Guilfoyle, 2004:93). The perceived benefits of a neo-liberal approach have been overshadowed by inconsistent global market policies and trade arrangements. This combined with ongoing drought and changing social and industrial rural policies have resulted in very challenging circumstances for young farmers to enter or remain viable in the Australian agricultural industry. On a market or productivity level, neo-liberalism has been successful in Australia by increasing productivity and efficiency of farming. On a social and environmental level, neo-liberalism has been less able to support the values and meaning of farming. Neo-liberalism has also increased environmental concerns because of financial pressures to maximise output to 'survive'; despite young farmers reporting an awareness and commitment to sustaining the environment. Deregulation of agricultural industries has led to farming structural adjustment, which is the policy instrument the Australian Government has used to remove farmers from the industry that they consider to be unviable (Vanclay, 2003: 81).

The policy approach used by the Australian government does make 'economic sense', however it presents many challenges for rural communities and young farmers wanting a viable future in the agricultural industry as it neglects to consider the social, community and individual impacts of a neo-liberal approach to policy making. Young farmers participating in the research were optimistic about the future of farming; however they had many concerns about their longer term future. These concerns appear to be consistent with the literature that raises similar concerns associated with neo-liberal agricultural policy (Vanclay, 2003; Halpin & Guilfoyle, 2004; Barr, 2002).

The current vision for Australian agricultural policy is to pursue a business oriented solution to a complex and variable policy environment. The young farmers that remain in farming have demonstrated a commitment to staying in the industry and have used strategies such as off-farm work, partners working off farm, decreased spending, increased borrowing and maximising their output opportunities. Whilst this commitment is evident in young farmers, there is an absence of mutual commitment from government and vested agricultural interests who continue to pursue and invest in an economic agenda. The incompatibility of some neo-liberal policies with the values and opinions of young farmers demonstrates the need for future consultation with this group to identify how to include social, historical and individual considerations in future public policy and state strategic planning processes.

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