

# Mental health of Wheatbelt farmers suffering due to climate change

December 11 2015, by Jo Manning

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Wheatbelt farmers struggle to see a future in farming because of the effects of climate change on their lands and communities, a Murdoch University study has found.

Neville Ellis from the Centre for Responsible Citizenship and Sustainability interviewed 22 [farmers](#) from the Wheatbelt town of Newdegate, 400kms south east of Perth, over the course of the 2013-14 agricultural season. The interviews revealed that the negative impacts of climate change, as manifested in issues like wind erosion and unpredictable weather, was undermining their wellbeing.

"The South West of Western Australia has experienced abrupt and

severe climate change in the last forty years," said Mr Ellis, who carried out the research for his PhD.

"Winter rainfall has fallen 20 per cent since the 1970s, average temperatures have risen almost a degree since the 1950s and climate extremes like heatwaves, frosts and droughts are more frequent and severe.

"Farmers have always worried about the weather but today that worry is becoming detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing. They feel they have less ability to exert control over their farmlands and as a result are fearful for their future."

Mr Ellis said the concern was manifesting itself in anxious behaviours with some farmers telling him they checked weather forecasts on their phones up to 30 times a day.

"They will be across five or six different websites, each with their own forecasts, allowing farmers to pick and choose those that offer them the greatest hope," he explained. "I also met farmers who track storm systems off the horn of Africa in the hope that the rain will arrive ten days later.

"A GP working in the Wheatbelt told me that many farmers are now suffering a form of 'seasonal affective disorder' – not from lack of sunlight, but from lack of rain."

Mr Ellis said a positive sense of place is vital for good health and mental wellbeing, particularly among people who maintain close living and working relationships with the land.

But the farmers' identities are so wrapped up in their land, any changes caused by variable weather had a negative effect on their emotional

state, he added.

"The farms are more than just a business for these farmers – it's their home, their personal history. There is no escape if they have a bad day at work," said Mr Ellis. "Some I talked to had become completely disengaged from the predictions and the forecasts – they shut themselves off in their properties with the curtains drawn so they wouldn't have to face the realities outside."

Mr Ellis said it was important farmers received support from counseling and health services in the region that were sensitive to this deep sense of connection to their lands.

"Unfortunately, with all the projections predicting our climate will get hotter and drier, it is only going to get harder for many of these farmers," said Mr Ellis.

"While the rains have come in the nick of time over the last two seasons for Wheatbelt farmers, there is no surety that this pattern will continue."

Mr Ellis' study was entitled Farmers' sense of place and mental wellbeing in an era of rapid [climate change](#): a case study in the Western Australian Wheatbelt.

Provided by Murdoch University

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