

Farmer suicides may rise with climate change. Is Australia prepared?

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Droughts, fires, and floods can have devastating consequences for farmers' mental health.

The [suicide](#) rate for Australian farmers is also [almost 59% higher](#) than the general population, and research has confirmed a link between [farmer](#) suicides and [extreme weather](#).

With climate change predicted to increase the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, Australia needs to prepare—or risk losing more farmer lives to suicide.

Extreme weather and farmer suicides

In Australia's prime agricultural region, the Murray-Darling Basin, extreme drought and [hotter temperatures](#) during 2006–2016 were associated with an increase in farmer suicides.

That [University of Adelaide research](#) also found a link between the number of months of drought and suicide rate, with just one additional month of [extreme drought](#) increasing the suicide rate by 32%.

Research has found [a link between droughts and suicides, too](#), predicting suicide risks for rural men in NSW aged below 50. "In particular, where farming males' identities are strongly linked to the productivity of their farms, suicides will be strongly linked to drought," those researchers from Curtin University and The University of Sydney found.

The [2023 National Farmer Wellbeing Report](#) surveyed 1,300 farmers from across Australia, and found that weather and [natural disasters](#) were the most common triggers for [mental health issues](#) among Australian farmers, affecting [47%](#).

Almost half of all farmers (45%) had experienced thoughts of self-harm or suicide, while almost one-third (30%) had attempted self-harm or suicide.

Extreme weather events that adversely impacted farming operations were reported by an overwhelming majority of survey respondents (88%). Farmers also reported considerable financial strains when an extreme weather event occurs, with an average cost of \$AU1.4 million per farm.

A [lack of control](#) over the weather, and a resulting sense of powerlessness, has previously been identified as a contributor to suicide deaths among farmers.

But as extreme weather events become more common and more severe in Australia, these disasters have cumulative impacts on the mental health of farmers, who are not only dependent on the land, but also identify profound emotional and psychological connections to their land.

Research into the mental health impacts of climate change has established that both the actual impact and the threat of losing one's livelihood, connection to land or sense of place are key contributors to mental health issues, including suicidality.

For farmers, these impacts are particularly significant as extreme weather becomes more frequent: This weather is no longer limited to isolated events, meaning [there is often no period of stability](#) to enable recovery before the next [drought](#), flood, or fire.

What does the future look like?

Temperatures are all but certain to rise further, and it's very likely the intensity of extreme rainfall events will also increase, Australia's national science agency CSIRO says.

Australia is also expected to face "mega-droughts," meaning droughts that last 20 years or more, [modeling from ANU researchers](#), drawing on

precipitation data from over 1,000 years suggests.

These mega-droughts are predicted to be a feature of the Australian climate, even without human-induced climate change. Introducing human-induced climate change into the mix is expected to exacerbate these droughts—presumably worsening their impact on farmers' financial and mental health.

What's being done?

Media campaigns for [suicide prevention](#) among farmers have [been used at saleyards](#) and the recent "[Don't Keep it Under Your Hat](#)" campaign has encouraged farmers to make use of the available supports.

The suicide prevention tool specifically for farmers and the communities, [Taking Stock](#), provides resources and supports at the community, relational, and individual levels.

Encouragingly, the number of [farmers seeking help](#) for mental health reasons doubled in 2023. There are also a range of suicide and [mental health literacy programs](#) designed for farmers and rural communities, such as the [Weathering Well app](#), the [Ripple Effect Project](#), and other farmer-specific resources available at [ifarmwell](#).

But with climate change predicted to worsen extreme weather events, governments would be wise to amp up suicide prevention and intervention programs.

These programs could focus on not just why farmers are dying—an area that has been researched—but instead targeting the means by which farmers are attempting and dying by suicide.

It's time for suicidology researchers to focus on individuals' [capability](#)

[for suicide](#), and tackle challenges presented by the fact that [access to firearms and other lethal means](#) are contributing factors for farmers' suicide capability.

Policies and education for farmers about reducing accessibility of means may be one avenue worth exploring for preventing farmer suicides during the fast-approaching reality of extreme weather conditions.

Provided by Griffith University

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