

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO RURAL SUICIDES

The opportunity to send a submission on suicide to the Senate is greatly appreciated.

My wife and I have attended every "Depression because of the Drought" meeting in our district in an effort to get help for our situation. We have been told the services available for depression, listened to speakers who have survived depression and are on permanent medication - but not once has the cumulative cause of depression been addressed. It was much easier to have a "feel good" meeting and blame it on the drought.

Many years of drought have certainly taken its toll but the cumulative pressure of the requirements of so many Government Departments in addition to the 15 hour days 7 days a week already worked in all sorts of hot dry conditions trying to keep stock alive by endless hand feeding, dragging dead and dying stock out of muddy dams etc. pushes farmers over the edge. It is very depressing to have to come in at night after a very trying day and try to cope with stacks of paperwork enforced by bureaucrats working a few hours daily, 5 days a week in airconditioned offices.

Every Act, legislation, law policies and its enforcement, initiated by Federal, State, local Government actions are policed by departmental officers trained in their specialised fields to enforce each facet of their responsibility. In the case of the Native Vegetation Act satellite surveillance is used and the Catchment Management Authority uses this to threaten farmers with big fines. How many urban dwellers would tolerate such constant invasion of privacy and fear of fines for something they may not even know about. Satellite surveillance is able to photograph properties down to a square metre.

Workcover is another that is onerous to farmers, with the threat that Workcover can come on properties with no notice and do inspections sufficient to put a farmer out of business at the worst and fine them for breaches they may not have been informed about. We had quite a good superfine wool growing business on our property until Workcover decided that shearing sheds had to have certain unrealistic standards which are unaffordable. Time and money had to be found to attend a Farm Safety Course with the result that I have had to defect all my equipment and allow no one to use them and also we can no longer risk employing any help for the heavy dangerous jobs and my wife and I (both in our 70s) have to do the jobs ourselves.

What a minefield the sole family farmer has to contend with as an individual. He and his wife are required to be informed, attend courses to comply, attend refresher courses where applicable even though they are exactly the same as the original. Such unnecessary courses are a waste of time and money and only guarantee a steady income for the lecturer

Keeping track of all Departmental name changes and responsibilities, form modifications, etc is another burden. Hours can be wasted in ascertaining the current name of a Department and determining if there is anyone in that Department that can give advice about a specific farm problem. Record keeping is so much of a requirement by many Departments - the BAS statement for GST requires much paperwork and involves constant amendments. Chemical usage etc all require records. All involve threats of penalties if mistakes are made.

The financial burden encountered by the farmer in the running of a farm is enormous compared to returns. The burden of unpaid additional time to comply with each Department's protocol and attendance at courses as well as travelling time and expenses are overwhelming. The family farm income is dependent on commodity prices at the time and is dependent on imports/drought/fire/flood/hailstorms/frosts/plague locusts, mice, flying foxes etc/weed control/irrigation availability/fertilizer costing/stock theft/animal husbandry costs/fuel costs etc. Farmers are forced to be price takers - not price makers. Australian farmers are the most efficient in the world but are also the only farmers in the world who are not appreciated by the Government and subsidised financially as they are in other countries. The cost of production in Australia is becoming greater than the returns.

There is no base price for any commodity - no wage for hours worked - no basic wage for the family farmer. There is no provision for holidays, or weekends off.

I recently asked a senior farmer at a cattle sale about how today's prices compared to 30-40 years ago. He said the sale of one beast would return enough to employ a farm hand for 6 weeks. The current price is between \$500-\$800 so would not employ anyone. The price 20 years was above what is received today as the price seems to be controlled by the two major supermarkets who determine the prices.

There is a basic rule that every 10 years any money invested should double in value to keep up with inflation. The basic wage has increased substantially over the years but farmers income is being eroded. The wheat farmers, totally at the mercy of the weather and plague locusts etc barely break even and are left with little to live on or service their debts after their efforts to provide food for the growing demand. Independent Regulatory Pricing tribunal.

With such ongoing low prices (except for lamb) all young farmers are leaving the land lured by the reliable work and high wages offered by the mining industry so there will be no future young farmers or shearers should the wool industry improve.

Farmers have been forced into a situation where they are unable to cope financially without a second off farm income so there will be less farmers in the future to produce the food as it is no longer financially viable. At the moment there are very few family farms that can earn a living, service any debts etc.

My wife have raised our three children, all of whom are in good, well-paying jobs and would never consider farming. We then took on the challenge of buying a development property of some 899 ha. We gradually added infrastructure including a home, sheds, fencing, dams etc.

We started out with a superfine wool enterprise which came to an end when Workcover decided that we would have to build a \$100,000 shearing shed which was not viable as wool prices fell. We then increased our cattle herd and were hit with many years of drought during which time it was very difficult to keep stock alive and provide water as the dams were very low and stock died in them. During a lull in the drought we also had 27 head of cattle stolen (stock we had been able to save in the worst of the drought by endless hours of hand feeding hay if available and cutting trees when there was nothing left). This represented a loss of \$20,000 and the police were too busy checking gun cabinets to satisfy a Government instruction instead of investigating the theft which was one on many in the area. During this time after reporting events to the police, someone, presumably the stock thieves left poison baits for our farm dogs to try to get us to leave. Following this we were unable to sleep and were very fearful for our safety.

When things settled down a little we decided to undertake a Farm Planning course put on by the Catchment Management Authority and run by TAFE. We had hoped to improve our farming skills. Instead it became a nightmare when we were told as were others in the class that we are not permitted to develop our farm or make a living from it. We were abused for adding more dams for water storage to help drought proof our property and for fire fighting also for putting in tracks to improve the safety for fire-fighters. The Native Vegetation Act has put paid to our farming future and devalued our substantial investment and years of work to that of a hunting block for ethnics to kill all wildlife with high powered guns.

We feel totally devastated and powerless, disillusioned and depressed to think that all our efforts have been futile. Our property which has been sustainably developed and run on a biological basis is now unsaleable for a farming enterprise.

Farmers have been driven to edge and in many cases have taken their lives by shooting and car accidents. Their livelihoods and rights to farm their freehold properties have been taken from them. They can no longer service their debts. They have become the sacrificial lambs so that the Government can achieve its KYOTO PROTOCOL targets.

In our "Democratic" system of Government there appears to be bureaucrats who are working to an agenda to have their Ministers present Bills to achieve the outcome they desire. They do not care who

Is driven to suicide by such rulings.

In State Parliament the instability of Ministerial portfolios has resulted in Ministers losing their portfolio to another Minister. Splinter groups - Independents/Greens/Shooters Party are affecting the dominant party compromising its deliberation. Integrity is being traded for votes to achieve a certain agenda.

An example of this is the Native Vegetation which is devastating the farming community and has been enhanced by the Native Vegetation Framework Consultation Draft. This will be enhanced all over Australia and give the CMA more powers for satellite surveillance and threat of large fines. This draft has been initiated in an underhand manner, with only one advertisement hidden in the Classified section of the "Land" newspaper so that few farmers would see it and lodge an objection. Such underhand tactics to obtain their objective are a disgrace and totally UNAUSTRALIAN.

So you can surely see that "feel Good" meetings, suggestions of counsellors and medication are of no help. What farmers want is to be able to farm THEIR FREEHOLD LAND to be able to make an honest living and not to be looking over their shoulder all the time worrying about law they may have broken unknowingly and the "the eye in the sky" watching their every move.