Thriving Farmers and Vibrant Communities: A Dynamic Duo for Agriculture

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In submitting this report, the Scholar has agreed to Nuffield Australia publishing this material in its edited form.

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Executive Summary

Wellbeing is a universal human need, met in individual ways and shaped by the community and environment around us. For farmers there are added considerations, including isolation and social, environmental and political pressures. While supported by services or initiatives, wellbeing generally develops within rural communities in everyday ways, through purpose, close relationships and belonging.

Australian farming is under sustained and increasing pressures. Farming families work larger areas with more demands, and many rural communities are noticing a decline in the local services and volunteer infrastructure that once held them together. There are stark statistics highlighting the impacts of these pressures on farmers that cannot be ignored. Yet at the same time, something more hopeful is happening in the background. The way agriculture talks about wellbeing has changed profoundly in the past decade; an uncomfortable subject that was once avoided is now being heard more openly in the sector. This report is about the keys to continuing this positive change and how we can support farmer wellbeing and build stronger, more supportive communities.

Six main learnings emerged from this study. Wellbeing begins with purpose, and its satisfiers are individual to each person. The everyday keys are simple: physical health, connection with others, and being able to regulate emotions. Language matters as much as the keys themselves; the words used influence how a farmer responds. Programs work when trust, empathy and facts are used together, and peer-level support, with the right guardrails and signposting, is one of the most powerful ways to support farmer wellbeing. Coordination between existing programs, not necessarily more, can reduce the overwhelm and help make them effective. Community strengthening is a wellbeing strategy in itself. Giving, or contributing, is where individual wellbeing becomes community strength, because when someone gives their time or expertise, they get something back for their own wellbeing, and the community grows stronger in the process. Vibrant rural communities produce wellbeing, not just support it, and how they welcome and integrate change matters more now than ever.

Bringing these findings together, this report sets out two frameworks. The first framework simplifies individual wellbeing into something to put into practice day to day: five keys to a thriving farmer: purpose, connection, physical health, regulation and giving.

The second is a Framework for Strong Communities, a social-ecological model with the thriving farmer at its centre, surrounded by social mechanisms, community conditions and structural supports, each shaping the others in both directions. From this framework, and from what I saw across eleven countries, five features set the strongest communities apart:

- their hidden infrastructure,
- trust,
- openness,
- a shared identity and
- the people who hold it all together.

The two sets of keys are not separate; giving is the one that links them, where individual wellbeing becomes community strength.

And underneath it all, what is measured shapes what is funded, so agriculture needs its own measurement framework that captures the wellbeing outcomes that programs already produce.

One theme resonates throughout: vibrant communities and thriving farmers grow stronger together. Community strengthening is not something that exists alongside wellbeing investment; it is a wellbeing strategy in itself, and a powerful one at that.

The study involved interviews, literature reviews, farm visits and too many conversations to count, across eleven countries. The volume of information was abundant, and the task of condensing it into one report was mammoth. But doing so helped me understand, first hand, why a farmer looking for guidance can feel overwhelmed. The case studies included are Farmstrong and Surfing for Farmers (New Zealand), ifarmwell, the Pinnaroo Project and the Fat Farmers and Active Farmers merger (Australia), the Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program, the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance, the Do More Agriculture Foundation, the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (Canada) and a farmer, Tim Morden from Canada. This is not a comprehensive list by any means, but these are examples for the reader to explore further.

This report does not attempt to duplicate the important clinical work already being done in agriculture. It offers a perspective, and a set of basic principles, for anyone who cares about the future of rural Australia. It shows what is working, and invites the reader to see their own community and their own wellbeing through that view.

Keywords: Farmer wellbeing, rural community, purpose, belonging, connection, prevention

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Foreword

I am fortunate to have been involved in agriculture my whole life, which instilled an appreciation and understanding of it from an early age. With my husband Dillon, I now help run a continuous cropping operation in the Mid-North of South Australia, growing dryland cereals, legumes and canola. Among other production-based focuses, it is important to our small team that we look after each other while we do it.

Growing up on a farm gave me a first-hand appreciation of rural life, and the highs and lows that come with that. In recent years I have noticed rising pressures on farming families. Farms are larger, families are fewer, technology has advanced quickly, and the level of social responsibility and compliance placed on a farm business today would have been unimaginable to our forefathers. Much of this is important and is progress, but it also comes at a cost.

Farming, my work in agronomy roles and a season abroad on farm exchange in Canada mean I have spent much of my working life around the people within the industry: farmers, agronomists, advisors, business owners and industry bodies. The people in agriculture are a big part of what I love about it, but throughout it all I have noticed something. Wellbeing is often the last thing farmers make time for.

My involvement with the Rabobank Client Council, delivering important community initiatives, and my role as our local Fat Farmers chapter coordinator have added further depth to that observation. This is what prompted me to find out more: to understand the dynamics, what is already working and what more can be done. I believe farmer wellbeing and rural community strength are foundational to the future of Australian agriculture, and are worth investing in seriously.



Table 1. Travel itinerary

Travel date	Location	Visits/contacts
August 14–15, 2024	Canberra, Australia	National Centre for Farmer Health Conference
November 6–8, 2024	Cairns, Australia (Zoom)	Rural Mental Health Conference
February 18, 2025	Jamestown, Australia	Allan Parker, OAM. Regional Brain Reset Workshop
March 3–7, 2025	Canberra, Australia	Pre-Contemporary Scholars Conference
March 4, 2025	Canberra, Australia	ABARES Outlook Conference
March 8–16, 2025	New Zealand	Contemporary Scholars Conference
March 17–24, 2025	New Zealand	Sandra Faulkner – 2012 Nuffield NZ Scholar, Gisborne Stephen Thomson – Surfing for Farmers, Gisborne Matte Kirk – Surfing for Farmers, Raglan, Pioneer Farmers at Surfing for Farmers session, Raglan Gerard Vaughan – Farmstrong, Wellington Nigel Beckford – Farmstrong, Wellington Kate Ivey – Kate Ivey Fitness, Twizel Phillipa Cameron – Farmer and What's for Smoko, Twizel
April 15, 2025	Australia – Zoom	Jo Drayton – Agri balance workshop
April 2025	Australia – Zoom	Michael Williams, Richard Sheppy, Rob Dawes, Jane Brine – Fat Farmers
May 18–21, 2025	Singapore	Global Focus Program
May 22–26, 2025	Taiwan	Global Focus Program
May 27–June 3, 2025	Zimbabwe	Global Focus Program
June 4–8, 2025	Romania	Global Focus Program
June 9–13, 2025	Poland	Global Focus Program
June 14–24, 2025	Chile	Global Focus Program
August 12, 2025	Saskatoon, Canada	University of Saskatchewan Merle Massie – Do More Ag Foundation Kendra Ulmer – Canadian Centre for Rural and Agricultural Health Michelle Pavloff – University of SaskAg Matters and FarmH initiative Karen Marcinkiw – Canadian Centre for Rural and Agricultural Health The Agricultural Health and Safety Network Lesley Kelly – Farmer and Do More Ag Co-founder

August 13–19, 2025	Manitoba, Canada	Glen, Teri and Taylor Dyck, Farmers Kurt and Tracy Heibert, Farmers Shaun and Steph McIntosh, Farmers Dustin and Laura Williams, Farmers Wayne Williams and Sheila Holyoake, Farmers Tim Morden, Farmer
August 20, 2025	Winnipeg, Canada	Briana Hagen – CEO Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing
September 2–9, 2025	UK	Sharon May, Nuffield UK Scholar 2025, Tim May, Nuffield UK Scholar 2011. Alex Crawley, 2025 Nuffield UK Scholar and Emily Crawley – Founders, Grazing Management, Wyeside, UK Diddly Squat Farm, Cotswolds, UK
September 10, 2025	Adelaide, Australia	Nuffield National Conference
October 28, 2025	Adelaide, Australia	GRDC Supporting Others Workshop, Sarah Crosthwaite, 2023 Nuffield Scholar, Steph Schmidt, Farm Life Psych, Beck Burgess, Burgess Consulting.
November 10, 2025	Scotland (Zoom)	Farmstrong Scotland Alix Ritchie, 2026 Nuffield Scholar UK, John Scott, Vic Ballantyne Nuffield 2022 Scholar, Jock Gibson Nuffield 2024 Scholar
December 3, 2025	Australia – Zoom	Courtney Bailey – Voconiq
January 28–30, 2026	Mid-North and YP, South Australia	Ben Wundersitz – Fat Farmers Fiona Hill – Community advocate and Neoen Community Liaison officer Penny Pratt MP – Member for Frome
February 5, 2026	Blyth, Australia	John Gladigau, 2007 Nuffield Scholar, ifarmwell, GPSA
February 2026	Australia	Shanna Whan – Sober in the Country
March 13, 2026	Australia – Zoom	Tracy Secombe – Farm Owners Academy
July 22, 2026	Adelaide, Australia	Lou Flohr, Farmer and Lameroo Forward Inc.

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To Nuffield Australia, for awarding me this scholarship, a privilege for which I am truly grateful. Also, for recognising the need for a social, people-focused topic within agricultural research. It is a reflection of the progressive and open-minded nature of the organisation, and of its continued commitment to developing leadership and knowledge right across the sector. Thank you for believing in me and entrusting me to undertake it, and for the networks it has opened to me, both nationally and internationally. These are relationships that will continue to give, and that I will value, for years to come.

To the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), thank you for your investment in me, and for recognising the importance of rural wellbeing to our industry. The broad scope and high level of research and support you continue to deliver across Australian agriculture is valuable.

To my husband, Dillon, for believing in me and being my biggest cheerleader. You selflessly encouraged me to take on such an incredible opportunity in the first place, and then backed me all the way through. You juggled the farm and family commitments with ease and took a real interest in all that this scholarship has offered us. This is a shared Nuffield experience and one we will treasure and draw on for a long time to come.

To our three children, Harley, Bill and Annie, for your understanding and support: for stepping up in responsibilities in my absence and showing resilience while our close-knit family was apart. You took on your own Nuffield experience, engaging in conversations with farming families abroad, and often encouraged me when I needed it most.

To Jane Greenslade and Emma Leonard, for persistently encouraging me to apply and showing me what this program can offer, and for the curious minds and endless thoughtful questions you both bring. And to Emma for meticulously proofreading my report draft, challenging me in the best way possible, and helping me to articulate my thoughts. To Roger Matthews, for your mentorship, and giving me opportunities to develop some of the foundational skills I would need, and for your words of wisdom as I prepared to take this on.

To the great support team at home, who held the fort while I was away: Grant and Annette, my Mum and Dad, and Mat and Craig. This would not have been possible without all the extra efforts you put in to keep the wheels on the farm turning and the daily routines of family life going.

I cannot write about preventative wellbeing in farming without acknowledging the work of my Nuffield mentor, 2023 Nuffield Australia Scholar Sarah Crosthwaite. I am grateful to Sarah for her mentorship, draft report review, and for the professional research, training and clinical understanding she and other experts in farmer mental health bring to the sector; I have learnt a lot.

To everyone who shared their time with me on this experience, whether hosting me, travelling with me, or opening their farms and communities to my questions: I am so grateful for your openness and generosity. Those conversations continue to shape my thinking.

And to my GFP3 family, a group of friends I did not know I needed. You challenged and encouraged me through some of the most memorable experiences of my life, and I look forward to cheering you all on in your future endeavours and contributions to agriculture.



Figure 1. Left: GFP3 family, Mariela Ramirez, Juliette Vernooji, Alan McDermott, Cherilyn Jolly-Nagel, James Carter, Maggie Jarrett, Tom Youl, Paul Evans, Claire Catford, Kari Moffat, Zoe McKay, Tarun Richards (Source: author). Right: Emma Leonard, Jane Greenslade, Cherilyn Jolly-Nagel, Trudi Oxley, Claire Catford (Source: author)

Note: Generative AI tools (Anthropic's Claude, Canva AI and Perplexity) were used in the preparation of this report, including collating and organising material from the author's own notes and research.

Abbreviations

ABARES	Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences
ACC	Accident Compensation Corporation (New Zealand)
ACT	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
CCAW	Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing
CWA	Country Women's Association
FCN	Farming Community Network (United Kingdom)
FDF	Future Drought Fund
FMG	Farmers Mutual Group (New Zealand)
FOA	Farm Owners Academy
GRDC	Grains Research and Development Corporation
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
NCFH	National Centre for Farmer Health
NFF	National Farmers' Federation (Australia)
NHS	National Health Service (United Kingdom)
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
PWI	Personal Wellbeing Index
RBA	Results Based Accountability
ROI	Return on Investment
RWS	Regional Wellbeing Survey
SFF	Surfing for Farmers (New Zealand)
SITC	Sober in the Country
SPA	Suicide Prevention Australia
ZIMSTAT	Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency

Glossary

Te Whare Tapa Whā	Māori model of health as a four-walled house
taha tinana	Physical wellbeing (Māori)
taha hinengaro	Mental and emotional wellbeing (Māori)
taha whānau	Family and social wellbeing (Māori)
taha wairua	Spiritual wellbeing (Māori)
ubuntu	Shared humanity, "I am because we are" (Southern African, seen in Zimbabwe)

Objectives

- Understand the pressures on farmers and rural communities in a changing agricultural landscape and how they affect wellbeing.
- Explore strategies that support the physical and mental wellbeing of farmers and strengthen rural community.
- Share global examples of what is working for farmers within successful programs and how these can be adapted to the rural population in Australia.
- Equip farmers and communities with knowledge and simple tools to navigate the complexities of modern agriculture and support their wellbeing.

Introduction

What is possible for Australian agriculture when farmers are looking after themselves well and have strong communities around them? The rewards of getting this right extend further than farmer wellbeing. During my Nuffield studies I saw outcomes this can lead to: a more productive sector, rural communities that are places worth staying in and moving to, and an industry that future generations of farmers, and skilled people from outside agriculture, see themselves in.

The story we often hear about rural Australia is one of resilience, highlighting the pressures of farming, such as rising costs and responsibilities, and of course the stark statistics of wellbeing decline. What we hear less often is what is already going well, and this is a promising position to consider and leverage.

The people in Australian agriculture produce food for the world and hold together the economic and social fabric of our rural communities. That alone makes them worth looking after well. Encouragingly, the way we talk about their wellbeing has shifted in the past decade in ways that would have, then, been hard to imagine. Wellbeing is no longer such a taboo topic, spoken about awkwardly, if at all. It's conversation farmers are starting to have more freely and openly. That progress is thanks to a lot of people who have done the work to get us here, and the opening minds of farmers themselves.

But there is still more to do. If we are serious about the future of rural Australia, and the industry of agriculture that we so love, we have to be serious about the people who make it happen. Looking after them properly is not an add-on when other matters are all resolved, it is foundational and a top priority.

Rural Australia now has an abundance of well-meaning wellbeing programs, resources, services and initiatives, and yet the very people they are designed for are often the ones who are missed, overwhelmed by the choice or blocked by the common barriers. Raising awareness and starting the conversation is one thing. Knowing what to do next is another, and it is this gap, particularly on how to put mechanisms in place early, that I set out to explore in this study.

This report is about what is working, mainly at the peer level, for farmer wellbeing. It draws on eighteen months of Nuffield travel across eleven countries, and on the years I have spent growing up in and deliberately choosing to stay working in Australian agriculture. The farmers and rural communities at the heart of this wellbeing issue are the reason I chose this topic.

This report is not written from a clinical perspective, and it does not attempt to duplicate the valuable expert work already being done in that space. It intends to be preventative and strengths-based, focused on the peer level, offering a lens for anyone who cares about agriculture to manage their own wellbeing, or their community's, prompting positive change.

Section 1 – Wellbeing and the power of purpose

"He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how" (Frankl, 2004, p. 84).

What is wellbeing and can it be defined?

Throughout eleven countries, in countless conversations across kitchen tables, farm sheds and boardrooms, a diverse group of people were asked what it means to live well. No two answers were the same, yet almost without exception people were overwhelmingly invested in the topic, and each had their own version of the answer.

Wellbeing is multifaceted and everyday; it is far more than just the absence of mental illness. Luke, March and McIlveen (2023) define it as “the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy,” spanning mental, physical, social and work life.

Wellbeing is profoundly personal, universally sought after, but has no single definition, because it is lived differently by every one of us. This report does not try to resolve that definition, or offer a single formula. It asks a more useful question: what helps a farmer thrive, and what part does the community around them play?

The pressures on farming families are already familiar to most of us, regularly reported and widely discussed. Because our brains are wired with a negativity bias, those pressures often resonate more strongly than the good things happening around us at the same time. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs (2001) captured this pattern in the phrase “bad is stronger than good”, explaining that negative events register more strongly, and linger longer, than positive ones. That is why understanding the negativity bias, and keeping a perspective on reality, is important, especially when pulled into conversations about these pressures. Acknowledging the bias is there, and countering it by deliberately surrounding ourselves with positive people, and choosing gratitude, is a conscious choice we must keep making.

Wellbeing sits on a continuum, not a fixed point. Jo Drayton’s Agri balance workshop maps it as five states we move through: thriving, healthy, surviving, struggling and crisis (see Figure 2). Recognising where we sit on that continuum, and what could help us move back toward thriving, is important.



Figure 2. Mental Health & Wellbeing continuum (Source: Holyoake, 2024)

The individual nature of a universal need

Just as a passing smile is understood the world over, despite barriers of language and culture, the desire for a life lived well is truly universal. And yet, what that life looks like is deeply individual, which is part of why it can feel so elusive, especially given how

prone humans are to comparison by nature. Gaining global perspective and taking ourselves out of our day-to-day allows a balcony view to attempt to understand what a life lived well actually looks like.

Travelling to so many places around the world let me look at true human needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), often depicted as a pyramid, is well known and widely studied. For a rural lens we could imagine these human needs as a ladder. At the bottom sit essential physiological needs (food, water, shelter and safety) and only once those are secure, the theory says, do we reach for the steps above of belonging and respect, and finally the sense that our life means something. In Australian agriculture the basics are, for the most part, met. Most farmers are fed, have a roof over their head, and although it is sometimes argued, are in most seasons, paid. This might lead us to assume that all must be well. But what is missing is where wellbeing is actually gained or lost. The higher you climb the ladder, the less a need can be met by a thing, and the more it depends on other people. Hunger is resolved by providing food. Belonging, worth and purpose can only be met through connection, by being seen, valued and needed. Emotion carries more weight the further up the ladder we go.

Stevi Howdle, Executive Officer of Farmsafe Australia, reflected on the idea of "unhappy prosperity", drawing on established theories of human needs, including Maslow's work. As basic needs are increasingly met, questions of purpose, meaning and belonging can become more prominent, the sense of "what now?" or "what if?" that can exist even when, on paper, life appears to be going well. She wondered what this might mean in farming communities, where factors such as isolation, responsibility and the pressures associated with agricultural life can interact with wellbeing in complex ways.

Maslow's hierarchy is helpful in understanding the basic needs and then the emotional influence, but there is scope to look deeper at this. Manfred Max-Neef, a Chilean economist, provided a theory that resonates within the context of understanding rural wellbeing. Whilst travelling through Chile, I gathered some incredible perspectives on humanity and drivers of wellbeing, and I found extra weight in his explanation of human needs by experiencing these. His interpretation is not a hierarchy, or ladder to be climbed in order, but a web of nine needs we all carry at once, in every culture and every age (Max-Neef, Elizalde and Hopenhayn, 1989).



Human Needs Matrix

After Manfred Max-Neef

	Being	Having	Doing	Interacting
Subsistence	Health, adaptability Sense of humour	Food, shelter, work	Feed, procreate, rest, work	Social setting, environment
Protection	Care, equilibrium, solidarity	Rights, social security, family	Cooperate, plan, help	Living space, dwelling
Affection	Self-esteem, respect, passion	Friendships, family, relation with nature	Make love, share, cultivate, appreciate	Privacy, intimacy, home, togetherness
Understanding	Critical conscience, curiosity, discipline	Literature, education teachers	Investigate meditate experiment,	Groups, community, schools, family
Participation	Dedication, respect, receptiveness	Rights, responsibility duties, work	Cooperate, dissent, agree on, interact	Associations, churches, family
Idleness	Curiosity, tranquillity, imagination	Peace of mind, games, parties	Day-dream, relax remember, brood	Privacy, intimacy, free time, landscape
Creation	Passion, intuition, imagination,	Abilities, skills, method, work	Work, invent, build, compose, design	Productive settings, workshops, time
Identity	Sense of belonging, self-esteem	Language, symbols, religion, values	Commit oneself, grow, recognise	Social rhythms, maturation stages
Freedom	Autonomy, boldness, passion	Equal rights	Dissent, choose, disobey, run risks	Temporal/ spatial plasticity

Figure 3. The nine fundamental human needs and the satisfiers that meet them (Source: adapted from Max-Neef, Elizalde and Hopenhayn, 1989)

What changes from place to place is not the needs but the satisfiers, the specific and individual ways people meet them. Another interesting learning from this theory is that these fundamental needs can be both a deprivation and a potential, dependent on the influence. The morning coffee ritual at a co-op in Manitoba, Canada, or the openness of communal spirituality in Taiwan, are both distinct answers to the same human question, with their own local and cultural influences.

The concept of a web, as used here by Max-Neef, is a fascinating one and is applicable to many studies in agricultural production. It was also adapted into a visual tool depicting the values in dairy farming by fellow 2025 Nuffield Scholar Wilco Brouwer de Koning from the Netherlands. Wilco demonstrated the values, interconnected by rubber bands, and how action on one side of the web impacts all the others. The translation of this in a wellbeing context is understanding that concentrating on just one of the needs within the matrix alone will not satisfy, and in fact, too much emphasis in one area will have impact elsewhere.



Figure 4. Wilco's web: values in dairy farming as an interconnected system (Source: Brouwer de Koning, 2025)

The power of 'why'

When meeting someone for the first time, it is common to ask "what do you do for a living?" Being asked WHY you live, and the purpose you live for, is a far more profound question. Being a farmer is one thing, but understanding why you are a farmer and what you love about it holds so much power. Simon Sinek, an author and trained ethnographer, explores purpose, meaning, and human behaviour in his book *Start with Why* (Sinek, 2009). He suggests that wellbeing is connected to living with purpose, explaining that "our WHY is the thing we give to the world", a source of meaning and balance in life. It is intertwined with our values and the things that are important to us. Often in farming, it might be the farm itself, the generations, the community and/or family. When our why is understood, everything else in wellbeing has a foundation to stand on. When life gets tough, and it does, it provides hope. Few people understood this better than Viktor Frankl.

"He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how" (Frankl, 2004, p. 84). Reading this in Man's Search for Meaning is powerful. Standing within the bounds of Auschwitz concentration camp during our Global Focus Program in Poland made it resonate more powerfully still. A group of Nuffield scholars, usually known for their questions and conversation, walked almost silently for two hours. It was a confronting reflection of humanity at both its worst and its most enduring. Eddie Jaku, an Auschwitz survivor, despite his torturous experiences, went on to build a new life in Australia and wrote a book about the way he saw himself, 'The Happiest Man on Earth'. He chose to answer the worst of humanity with gratitude and kindness (Jaku, 2020). This visit, along with Frankl and Jaku's stories, gave me a strong appreciation of purpose and human connection, and of what truly matters.



Figure 5. Gates to the Auschwitz concentration camp, Poland. *Arbeit Macht Frei* "Work sets you free" (Source: author)

With respect to agriculture, one of the most powerful examples of hope through a sense of purpose during my travels was in Zimbabwe. Agriculture is the main livelihood for around 70 per cent of Zimbabweans (International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD], 2022), the majority of them smallholder farmers producing mainly for their own consumption. And around 70 per cent of rural Zimbabweans live below the poverty line (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT] and World Bank, 2020). In his award-winning Nuffield report on the future of farming there, 2024 Nuffield Scholar Steven Pocock (Pocock, 2025) captures the realities without sugar-coating them. He describes a country shaped by decades of political instability and periods of hyperinflation, and despite this, his findings stay resoundingly optimistic for the future of agriculture in the country. Steven embodies the positive mindset I met again and again in Zimbabwe. The response to immense uncertainty and challenge was simple: "make a plan". People were not in denial of how hard things are, but they refused to let the hardship define them. In Zimbabwe, purpose was not something private and personal. It was a collective hope-filled vision for their future, and a community mindset that will stay with me.

Stuart, a blueberry farmer at Palmlife blueberry project, was one of many examples of the goodness of people in agricultural business in Zimbabwe who lived this philosophy. He focused on far more than growing the crop and running a profitable business. He was also deeply committed to the community around him. He helped build a school for the locals and offered continued support, knowing that building community and supporting families delivered greater strength than profitability alone. I could not help but gain a sense that this commitment to serving others and strengthening community gave something profound in return. A lesson, I think, in how to satisfy multiple elements of the human needs matrix at once.

All of this is where wellbeing begins. It starts with a why that is worth getting up for, and worth fighting for when things get hard. However, knowing your why is not enough on its own. It has to be continuously worked at, lived out in the small things done every day, and it is not achieved alone. The everyday habits that keep us well, and the people around us who keep us going, are the next important consideration.

The everyday tools

"If exercise was a drug, it would be the most prescribed drug in the world, because it works" Farmer, Souris, Manitoba, 2025

Knowing the HOW of wellbeing is the next pillar to understand. The key lies in the little actions that we take every day. Wellbeing is not something we simply get or lose; it is something that needs to be built, in small, repeatable ways and committed to. The good news is that we have real agency in it. Farmstrong New Zealand captures this with the idea of a wellbeing account: the small, regular deposits we make on the good days are what we draw on when times are hard.

Throughout my studies, I came across many versions of the keys to wellbeing, none of them complicated, and most backed by solid evidence, such as the Five Ways to Wellbeing. Within this framework, it is stated that "the power and value of this simple concept lies in finding ways that work for us, consistently taking action and noticing the difference" (Aked et al., 2008).

There is no shortage of wellbeing advice, each with its own interpretation of the 'keys'. Different approaches have their place, but for farmers with already full plates, the sheer volume makes it hard to know where to start. The keys here aren't aiming to be another formula, just a simple place to start with a rural focus, and a way to cut through the noise. As this report recommends: reduce the overwhelm, don't add to it.

So, what do these keys look like in practice? Again and again, the people I met came back to three areas.

The first is our **physical needs.** Gerard Vaughan, who leads Farmstrong in New Zealand, calls it a 'wellbeing account' and says to approach farming like a professional athlete: move your body, eat and sleep well, and find small ways to stay active even on the longest days. His practical advice, and the wider Farmstrong model, are captured in full in Case Study 1 in the Appendix.

Looking after yourself physically is where this begins, with eating well, moving most days, sleeping well, and being honest with yourself about alcohol or substances. Looking after the mind is the next layer, whether that is talking things over with someone who understands, or finding a professional when the ordinary supports are not enough. Keeping the mind learning matters too, because a mind still growing is a mind that stays engaged. Knowing simple ways, that work for you, to boost the wellbeing account through the body's own hormones is a useful tool to draw on when you notice a lack in a certain area. Some examples of these can be seen in Figure 6, and can be tailored to what works for the individual.

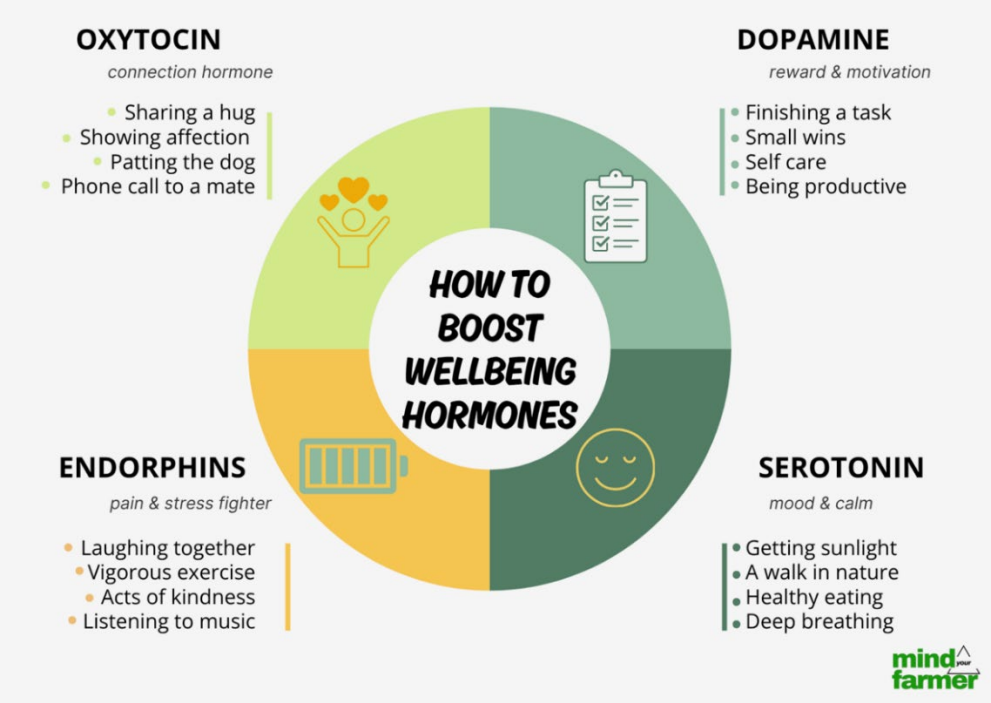


Figure 6. Small habits for wellbeing, based on hormones and examples of what satisfies each. (Source: author)

The second is **connection**, which runs in two directions. Firstly, it is reaching out and receiving support. For Alex Crawley, a fellow 2025 Nuffield Scholar and first-generation farmer in the UK, the close relationship with his wife Emily, who is both his honest feedback and his cheerleader, is one of the keys to his own wellbeing. At Surfing for Farmers (SFF) in New Zealand, farmers find connection by getting off the farm and into the ocean together, where in a relaxed environment the hard conversations come more easily. The other direction in connection is just as powerful: it is looking outward, giving, and being part of something bigger than ourselves. Matte Kirk, who runs the SFF session in Raglan, New Zealand, loves surfing but chooses not to surf at the sessions himself. His joy comes from watching the farmers get into the water. A focus beyond ourselves can provide perspective and quieten the noise in our own heads.



Figure 7. Surfing for Farmers, Raglan, New Zealand. Left: Wade Bell and Matt Dalley (Pioneer Farm Systems specialists), the author and Matte Kirk. Middle: Matt, Wade and the author heading for the surf. Right: Chatting to an SFF participant during the session. (Source: author)

The third is **mindfulness and regulation**, part of which is understanding and learning to manage what goes on in our heads. The negativity bias raised earlier is a survival instinct built into our genetics, for good purpose. On a walk checking cattle with Alex Crawley, he put this in a way that really stuck with me, a perspective he gained through years in the military: “the brain is not a truth machine, it is a prediction machine”. I have revisited it on many occasions and it reminds me that we should not believe everything the brain tells us; it is predicting what might happen with an intention to keep us safe. As Sharon May, a counsellor and fellow 2025 Nuffield Scholar in the UK, reminded me, an important part of regulation is simply coming out of an adrenaline state through a walk, sewing, or music, anything that uses the whole mind, because constant stress is not something the body can sustain.

“Find something that uses your whole brain, like I use Scuba Diving” Farmer, Manitoba, Canada on a key to regulation for wellbeing

Simple is not the same as easy. Knowing these keys and continuously living them are two very different things, and the second is far harder alone. Arguably the most powerful key of all is connection, and this is where a significant aspect of this study focuses, from looking at the ways individuals find connection to supporting the community that sustains them.

The people, the people, the people

What a privilege it was, in New Zealand, to be introduced to one of the foundations of Māori culture. “He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata”, translated as ‘what is the most important thing in the world? It is the people, the people, the people’. This sentiment echoed throughout the rest of my Nuffield travels, different interpretations but the same core. It was evident in Zimbabwe through ‘ubuntu’, the idea that a person is defined through others. There I saw this lived out most clearly in the women I met, who held households and farms together while many of the men were away working in South Africa. These women worked together for a common goal and to support one another. It was also seen in action at the Malilangwe Trust, which gives children in isolated communities access to education and to work, helping them find their place in society and the chance of a livelihood in their future.

Belonging

Belonging is a fundamental human need that we do not always realise. It is grounding and feels truly safe. Like the ease of walking into a room where people know your name and understand you, a feeling like you are meant to be there and the relief of not having to explain yourself.

It looks different from one place to the next. In its most definitive form, you find it in communities where belonging is built into the way of life. In Canada, I visited a Hutterite colony outside Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, an independent, self-sufficient community whose members live together, eat together, work together, worship together, even think together. Everyone knew their place, their role, the people around them, and to some extent even their future. Much of that purpose and routine centres on their strong

Anabaptist faith. It is not necessarily a model I am proposing for Australian rural communities, but it shows how true belonging can be deliberately built.

Reflecting on the Hutterite colony visit, Stevi Howdle from Farmsafe Australia offered a thought that communities like this raise interesting questions about the relationship between community design and wellbeing. She was curious whether the strong sense of shared identity, purpose, belonging and contribution observed during the visit might be part of what supports the perceived positive wellbeing. With shared community and spiritual life providing a broader sense of connection and meaning, it prompted the question of whether the way a community is structured can itself create conditions that support wellbeing.

At the Nagel farm, also in Canada, my friend and fellow 2025 Nuffield Scholar Cherilyn Jolly-Nagel, among many other important roles, cooks the meals that go out to the staff on the tractors. Once a task she resented, because she has broad skills beyond this, she now sees it as valuable work: it gives the staff a real sense of belonging and it lets her check in on their wellbeing. The farm's WhatsApp group, get-togethers on rainy days and end-of-season ski trips are part of that same design. The result is a farm that attracts seasonal workers by word of mouth from as far away as Western Australia, and picks up local Hutterite members when they are looking to experience life outside the colony.

The American researcher Brené Brown captures the heart of it: "True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are" (Brown, 2017). Before this can happen, it is important to get to know who you are and what your values are. From there belonging is easier, being part of something that does not need you to perform to keep your spot.

Belonging, like trust, looks different from one place to the next. For some it is found through faith. In the UK, similar to Australia, church attendance in rural areas has declined, but Sharon May made an observation worth considering. The church, when it was more central to rural life, was a regular meeting place with a higher purpose and belonging. It came with a priest whose presence offered both leadership and someone to talk to in confidence, and it provided a designated day off in the week for catching up with the local community. Much of that has been lost, and with it something that many modern farms, working seven days a week, no longer have. In Taiwan, we were welcomed into a temple that was open to multiple faiths. It did not matter your religion; all were welcome. Temples like these were used as community centres as much as places of worship, with a powerful sense of belonging and openness for shared concerns like health and family.



Figure 8. Temple in Taiwan (Source: author)

For many farmers I met, belonging is found in the simple, everyday act of turning up: the local Agricultural Bureau or CFS, the UK Young Farmers' group, Surfing for Farmers on a Friday morning in Gisborne or Raglan, or the volunteer crew on the Crawleys' farm. The activity is not the point. The sense of belonging is.

An extraordinary example emerged in the UK in 2026. The Hawkstone Farmers' Choir, thirty farmers Jeremy Clarkson brought together to promote his Hawkstone beer, won Britain's Got Talent (ITV News, 2026) with more than a million public votes. The choir used their platform to raise awareness of farmer mental health, and donated their £250,000 prize to charities including Mind. Just as important as the win was what the choir had already done for its members. Thirty farmers, mostly working alone in their fields all week, had been coming together regularly to sing. Judge Amanda Holden captured it in her words to the choir: "Farming touches every single person in this country… this choir, I know, has given you solace and joy and comfort and friendship." Farmers were being told, in front of a million people, that they were seen and appreciated.

The Regional Wellbeing Survey supports this pattern in Australia's numbers. On a scale of one to seven, Australians overall score 5.24 for Sense of Belonging, regional Australians 5.39, farmers 5.58, regional farmers 5.62, and older farmers 5.90, one of the highest cohorts measured (University of Canberra, 2025). Rural communities are particularly good at building belonging, a strength that must be leveraged.

Identity

For most people, work is a thing they do. For farmers, more often than not, work is also part of who they are. This is where belonging and identity meet. On an individual level, a farmer's sense of who they are is closely connected with belonging, purpose and wellbeing. It is also built socially, through the everyday interactions, roles and recognition a farmer experiences within their community.

Stephen Dennis at the Farming Community Network (FCN) made an important point many farmers have probably felt: the farm can own you. The paddocks you work every day and know like the back of your hand, or the animals you have bred through a long line of careful breeding and worked with in the yards your grandparents built, these are not external possessions that a farmer can just give or take. They make up part of who they are, almost intertwined into their DNA.

Alex Crawley has noticed this himself. He has the unique perspective of coming into farming as a first-generation farmer, with fresh eyes and without the typical biases it brings. He explained that farming is identity, and because of that, retirement, succession, attacks on farming practices and even weather events can feel personal, and the difficulty is not just what has happened but what it means for who the farmer actually is.



Figure 9. Left: Alex and Emily Crawley, Wyeside, UK (Source: Wood, 2023). Right: Alex explaining his grazing management concept to the author, Harley, Bill and Annie (Source: author)

Identity in farming is both a support and a vulnerability for wellbeing. On the supportive side, it provides purpose, meaning, continuity across generations, and the drive to keep going despite the long hours and hard work. The day-to-day work carries a strong 'why' that survives price volatility, drought, machinery breakdowns and all the fragilities of farming. It is part of what is most admirable about rural Australia, often described as resilience. Interestingly, in Canada, I heard the word 'resilience' itself is beginning to be met with eye-rolls by some farmers, heard as an instruction just to cope better rather than as a recognition of the load they were already carrying. Schirmer's recent Australian research reflects this, suggesting we stop telling farmers to "be more resilient" and instead ask what barriers they are facing to building it (Schirmer, 2026). But the same depth of identity that creates resilience makes it a vulnerability. Sharon May named one of the highest-risk groups she sees as farmers in their sixties navigating inheritance, succession and the loss of an identity they have carried their whole working life.

Identity and belonging are the foundation of what makes a real difference to farmer wellbeing. The farmers I met who were doing well were not always the ones with the most robust businesses or the most favourable seasons. They were the ones who knew who they were beyond the farm, and had people around them who saw them for it. A farmer is more than just the farm. They are also a parent, a partner, a footy coach or a community volunteer. When the farm is hard, having other parts of who you are to hold onto makes a real difference.

We don't just need to rely on examples such as these to tell us this; it is supported by science. Social baseline theory describes what we have always sensed, that we regulate stress better in the presence of trusted others (Beckes & Coan, 2011). It reinforces the critical piece about community in this research, that strong communities are not a nice-to-have, they are essential to the people within them. And so, the question becomes a bigger one: what makes a community strong, what is detrimental to it, and what does it take for farmers and their communities to truly thrive?

Section 2 – Rural community: meaning, dynamics and global evidence

What we mean by community

Community is one of those words we use every day without ever knowing exactly what it means. In 1955 the American sociologist George Hillery reviewed the academic literature and found ninety-four separate definitions of community (Hillery, 1955). Only one element appeared in all ninety-four: people. Everything else (place, purpose, common interests, shared culture) arrived and departed depending on the author's angle.

That ambiguity has not been resolved in the seventy years since. For a working purpose in this report, one modern definition is useful. MacQueen and colleagues (2001), writing in public health, defined community as "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings." That single sentence encompasses three ideas: a place or setting, a common interest or perspective shared by its people, and a purpose that brings them together.

A place-based community is defined by geography: the people who live in Lameroo, or the Cotswolds. This is what most people picture when they use the word, and what I have always thought of first when considering community. An interest-based community forms around a shared identity or activity that transcends geography: Fat Farmers groups in their local towns, the Motherland support groups or Sober in the Country's Bush Tribe, are all examples of an interest-based community. Jacki Schirmer and Melinda Mylek (2020) describe this in their Murray-Darling Basin research. Most rural Australians, it turns out, live within both kinds (place and interest) at once.

Alongside geography and interest or identity, a third dimension to community became clear across my travels and study. It is the purposive or goal-oriented community, one that is formed around producing a specific outcome, rather than just a shared interest or identity alone. Where an interest-based community's main aim is belonging and connection around something members care about, a goal-oriented community exists to achieve something beyond itself, a change or a result through the group's sustained effort. The Hutterite colonies of Saskatchewan (as explained in Section 1), Alex and Emily Crawley's conservation-grazing volunteers in the UK, and Lameroo Forward Inc (further explanation to follow) are all examples. Others are the peer network groups formed to share and challenge both business and personal aspects of farming.

The Farm Owners Academy (FOA) mastermind model is an Australian example of peer network groups delivered through intentional, structured practice. Tracy Secombe from FOA describes the mastermind concept anchored in Napoleon Hill's Think and Grow Rich: two or more minds coming together create a "third mind", a collective intelligence greater than the sum of individual thinking (Hill, 1937). FOA delivers this through cohort groups of around eight farm businesses committing to a three-year program together. The design deliberately mixes production types and avoids placing neighbours in the same group, on the basis that distance from immediate neighbours makes honesty easier and reduces the fear of gossip. As co-founder Greg Johnson

describes it: "the combined intelligence of the mastermind creates a wisdom far beyond my own." It is peer support with guardrails, applied at the business-development level, and shows that structured peer formats can hold their own alongside informal ones. Canadian farmer Dustin Williams values a similar peer group, put together by his accountancy firm, that deliberately mixes regions to avoid the local politics of neighbouring farms.

What sets purposive communities apart is that they are chosen, and they exist because the people in them recognised something important and built it. In rural Australia, where the place-based aspect is coming under pressure with changing populations and declining services in towns, the purposive dimension is now an even more important part of belonging and finding a sense of community.

In reality, few groups sit neatly in just one of these categories and thinking in these dimensions isn't about fitting groups into one box. It's to help think about what different kinds of community offer, and where a gap might exist that a new or different type of group could fill.

Thriving, surviving, declining

No two communities are the same, and they are not all travelling in the same direction either. Some are thriving, some are surviving from year to year, and some are declining. Jacki Schirmer and Melinda Mylek at the University of Canberra further described this spectrum in 2020 through a study of communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. Their framework names six dimensions that help measure community strength (Figure 10): overall wellbeing, population and health, economy and employment, community and social connection, physical amenity, and services and infrastructure. Communities that score well across all six sit in the thriving category. Those that score poorly across most fall into the decline category. The majority sit somewhere in between, along the spectrum, in what Schirmer and Mylek call surviving.



Figure 10. Six dimensions of community strength, and the thriving–surviving–declining continuum. (Source: adapted from Schirmer and Mylek, 2020)

What matters more than these labels are the factors that are contributing to them. A thriving community, in the terms drawn from the KU Work Group for Community Health and Development (2014, cited in Schirmer and Mylek, 2020), is one that offers its people a decent quality of life economically, physically, environmentally, socially and politically. It is not a community made up of only healthy or wealthy individuals. It has a character over and above the individuals who live there, a character produced by how the people, institutions and infrastructure all work together.

A useful practitioner-level framework by D. Carver complements and adds context. Carver, cited in Caroline Batley's Kellogg NZ work on rural community services (Batley, 2022), names four things that character comes down to at the ground level: a means to support each other, a place to connect, a common challenge, and quality leadership.

One of Schirmer and Mylek's most useful findings is that communities are not fixed in place. Some communities in their study bucked the trend of decline against difficult odds. They were often the smaller communities, further from services, and older in population, but they were doing something special in the way their people worked together that helped the trajectory move forward. A community's future will not be decided just because it is remote, or small, or losing services. What makes the difference is the character of the community itself, having passionate leaders, and the daily work its members put in to back their leaders and hold that character together.

The hidden infrastructure

Rural infrastructure usually means the things that are budgeted for and counted, such as the roads, schools, libraries and health centres. Just as important are the everyday places that are often overlooked, the gym, the pub, the men's shed, the CWA rooms, the sports club, the church hall, the school gate or the machinery dealer's counter. People gather there without needing a reason, and some of the most important conversations happen there. This is what holds a community together.

Courtney Bailey and her colleagues at Voconiq have spent years running community perceptions research across Australian agriculture. Places such as schools, pubs and local sporting clubs provide more than services or recreation. They create regular, informal opportunities for people to gather, maintain relationships and reinforce a shared sense of community. When a school closes, a pub shuts, or the local footy club can no longer sustain a team, a community loses more than an amenity. It loses a piece of the ritual that was keeping its people connected to one another.

These places look different from one country to the next, but they do the same thing. In the UK, the Young Farmers' Clubs meet fortnightly. Sharon May, who has spent decades working in rural mental health in the UK, told me that those meetings give a young farmer somewhere reliable to turn up on a set night, with people they know. In Canada, farmers gather for what everyone calls 'coffee shop talk'. It happens wherever there is a spare counter, often at the local co-op or machinery dealer, and it is where people gather, stories are told, worries can be shared, and where it is noticed when someone hasn't been seen for a week or so. The coffee itself is not the point. It becomes a reason to turn up and a routine to commit to; it's a place a farmer can connect without having to explain why.

Australia also has strong examples of communities doing this. Community building expert Peter Kenyon put it simply to a workshop in Gnowangerup, Western Australia: "the cavalry isn't coming; you're going to have to save yourselves". But doing it ourselves doesn't mean doing it alone, or starting from scratch with a new group, committee and governance structure every time. In the South Australian Mallee, I found a great example of this work in Lameroo. The community group, Lameroo Forward Incorporated, is the town's volunteer-driven progress body, and Lou Flohr facilitates a community playgroup under its umbrella that has become a place for families arriving from South Africa and the Philippines to connect. Rather than running as a separate committee with its own paperwork and office-holders, the playgroup sits as a subcommittee under Lameroo Forward. Lou is clear that this simple structural choice, consolidating rather than proliferating committees, is a large part of why it has worked. From that experience she offers a broader recommendation to other rural communities: consolidate committees rather than adding new ones, break volunteer roles into bite-size chunks, and have clear job descriptions for each, so that volunteering becomes accessible at every level of capacity.

This matters, because not everyone starts with the same capacity to give. Lou's perspective on volunteering is an important reframe, and one we should leverage: *"volunteering is actually a privilege,"* she said, because it means you have the capacity to give. Some people in a community do not, because they are too busy making ends meet, or don't have the skills to do so. It is important to understand this

with empathy, before judgement, and work to find out the levers that will encourage newcomers to town to get involved.

There is a second kind of hidden infrastructure that has a similar impact in a different way, through external reach: Rotary, Lions, Nuffield exchanges, sporting fixtures with neighbouring towns and agricultural study tours. Pip Cameron in New Zealand describes these as the hidden infrastructure that keeps a community's perspective open. A young person leaves the district for a year on exchange and comes back with more context and experience, a sports carnival team fills the town for a weekend, a neighbour returns from a study tour with an idea, and all of this keeps the community in touch with the wider world. When those channels are lost, the community narrows and, without noticing, risks developing insular small-town issues.

Not all small-town connectedness is easy. Stevi Howdle at Farmsafe Australia has spent a lot of time thinking about new arrivals, and she offered another perspective on the judgement and gatekeeping that can form between those who have been there forever and the newcomer. Sometimes a small community can be harder for a person to belong to than to leave. Stevi's call is for curiosity before judgement. A community's hidden infrastructure is at its strongest when it also holds an open mind. My Nuffield travels showed me, first hand, how much difference it makes to stay curious, take the time to know somebody, and resist relying on a first impression.

How communities have changed over time

Rural communities in Australia have been changing over time, perhaps now even more rapidly. We can often misread the context of this change though. We are quick to assume that rural Australia is declining. When we look at the actual numbers, it may come as a surprise that they have actually been remarkably stable. Rural communities have been changing in their dynamic, not in the broad numbers as such. We cannot wish that change away, but we can try to understand it and look for the opportunities that arise alongside the things that have changed.

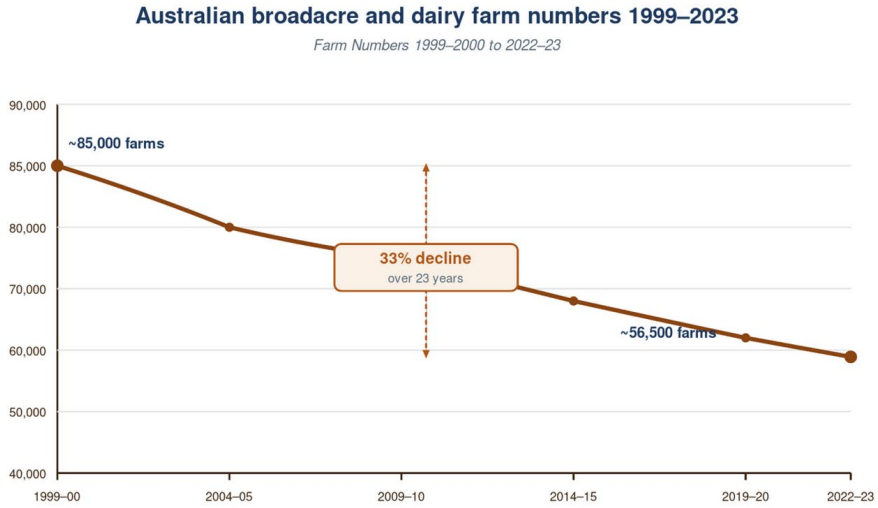


Figure 11. Decline in Australian broadacre and dairy farm numbers, 1999–2000 to 2022–23. (Source: ABARES, 2024)

Australia's rural population share has stayed remarkably steady, hovering between roughly 13 and 18 per cent for the past 60 years. But the number of farming businesses inside that share is what has collapsed. ABARES data shows that broadacre and dairy farms declined by around a third between 1999–2000 and 2022–23, dropping to approximately 56,500 farms nationally (Figure 11). The cropping sector, in which my farm fits, has been hit the hardest, with cropping farm numbers declining by 40 per cent nationally over the same period (ABARES, 2024). A district that once had twenty farming families now has closer to twelve.

The demographic data tells the same story. Fewer farms, larger holdings and older farmers is the shape of Australian farming today. The median age of the Australian agricultural workforce is 50 years and has remained steady for a decade. However, this varies significantly by role, with the average age of primary broadacre farmers sitting closer to 63 years (ABARES, 2023). Alongside this, rural centres have lost hospitals, police stations, banks, government departments, schools, sporting clubs and churches over decades of service consolidation and urbanisation.

It is easy to blame lower population numbers for the increased sense of isolation many farmers feel, but observations in the UK add complexity to that notion. UK rural areas are far more densely populated than Australia’s, and yet, despite the absence of geographical isolation, rural people there still feel socially isolated, because people's connection to agriculture, and to each other, has declined. Population numbers alone are not the whole story. What matters is whether the people in a rural community have the chance to be connected to others through shared purpose.

At the same time, Australia's regions are changing shape. Regional Australia has grown by 6.3 per cent since 2019 (Regional Australia Institute, 2025). In the 2024–25 financial year, capital cities recorded a net internal migration loss of around 30,000 people to regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2026). The pressure on our small rural communities is not that people are leaving the regions overall. It is that the farming families that used to occupy them are becoming a smaller share of the whole, and the newer arrivals possibly need different infrastructure to belong. The character of a rural community, the way it welcomes and integrates its newcomers, matters more now than it ever has.

The pressure on rural volunteering, in individual districts, is not just anecdotal. Volunteering SA & NT's 2025 State of Volunteering Report found that a third of current and past South Australian volunteers had recently reduced or stopped their volunteering, with burnout from over-volunteering among the leading reasons. Volunteer managers now name retention as a bigger concern than recruitment, and the sharpest decrease they have seen since 2023 has been at board level, where the availability of leadership volunteers has fallen the furthest (Volunteering SA & NT, 2026). The people who hold volunteer-run organisations together are wearing thin. Roles are becoming too demanding for the time volunteers have, and compliance demands are rising. For the sake of strong rural communities, volunteers must be supported, in roles they can sustain.

The most valuable responses to changing communities I saw overseas were not necessarily trying to bring back the businesses that had gone. They were rebuilding the relational infrastructure those businesses once offered. The Farming Community Network in the United Kingdom, known as FCN, is one example. Beginning in the mid-1990s as a faith-based crisis response, it has evolved over three decades into a prevention and wellbeing organisation, county by county, matched to the specific

stressors of each local farming community. It now runs across the UK with around 400 volunteers, and partners with Young Farmers Clubs on early-intervention programs such as ‘Time to Thrive’ (Farming Community Network, n.d.). Stephen from FCN described their model as *walking with people, not fixing them*, creating options and helping farmers help themselves, and being available to listen when other listeners have moved on. FCN is not a clinical service. It is a trusted bridge and triage layer into the NHS and talking therapies. Where the ordinary places of connection are being lost, FCN is one of the ways a rural community has consciously built new ones (Dennis, pers. comm., 2025).

Adaptation happens on a smaller level too. Where a Rotary exchange program is no longer available, a WhatsApp group of women in dairy may have taken up part of the same work. Families arriving from abroad, such as the South Africans to Lameroo, bring energy, skills and their own interpretation of what a community can be. Digital platforms now reach farmers on their tractor at any time of day, and international knowledge sharing happens at the touch of a button. Communities that thrive today are not the ones with the most people; they are the ones that have found ways to bring their people together for shared purpose, and to keep looking for new ways as things keep changing.

There is a cautionary perspective on change worth considering. Travelling to Zimbabwe, and also learning from Steven Pocock’s Nuffield work, shows how policy made without regard for its social and economic consequences, from colonial rule in Rhodesia through to land reform, leaves impacts that last for decades. Every policy decision made today will play out for generations to come, just as decisions made in the past impact us today. Change will happen. What matters is that policy makers, farmers and communities stay connected and adapt to it together.

The social-ecological view of community wellbeing

Wellbeing is not something we can achieve alone; it is found in connections with others. Although we all need different amounts of it, connection is not a preference. It is a basic human need hardwired into us.

That connection is shaped by everything and everyone around us: our family, our friends and neighbours, the community we belong to, and the industry, government and culture we work within.

This is what is called a social-ecological model, and there are many well-studied examples. The concept traces back to Bronfenbrenner (1979), who placed the individual at the centre of concentric rings of influence, and has since been adapted widely, most notably in public health through the work of McLeroy et al. (1988).

Bringing together what this study found, Figure 12 sets out a framework for strong communities, a social-ecological model of farmer wellbeing, built as four concentric rings. At the centre sits the thriving farmer. Purpose, identity, belonging and connection are felt individually and are closely connected to the ‘thriving farmer’ core, but none of them are built alone. They also come from interaction with others, from being seen, included and known. That is why, in this framework, they sit in the next ring out. Social mechanisms (trust, belonging, connection, purpose, identity, reciprocity, peer networks, volunteer capacity and language) grow between people and influence the core directly. Community conditions (leadership, hidden infrastructure, local services,

openness and a community's shared identity and purpose) make a place function well or struggle. Structural supports (government and policy, funding architecture, health systems and referral pathways, industry bodies, sector coordination and continuity of care) shape everything within. The influence runs in both directions. Each layer is supported by the ones around it, and the strength of one is affected by the others. The important point is not what this model is, but how all of this works together to influence wellbeing.

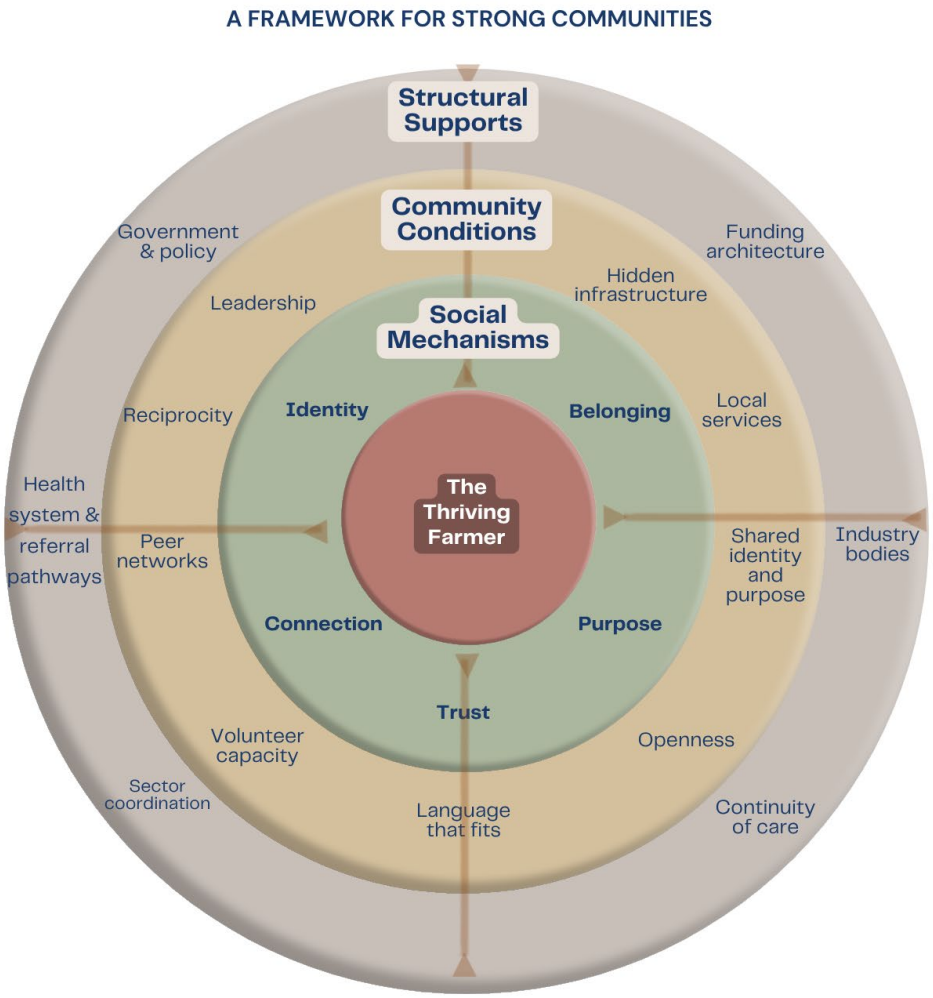


Figure 12. A framework for strong communities: the social-ecological model of structural supports, community conditions, social mechanisms, and the thriving farmer at the core. (Source: author)

The Pinnaroo Project is a good example of each part of the model working. From 2021 to 2023, the Mallee town of Pinnaroo in South Australia ran a three-year community arts-in-health program with the Mallee Arts Group and Flinders University's Caring Futures Institute. Structural supports came through university research and philanthropic funding. Community conditions formed through the local arts network and the leadership driving it. Social mechanisms, like trust, came through repeated, low-pressure interactions. And as a result, participants found purpose, belonging and connection with measurable improvements in wellbeing. An independent evaluation estimated a return of $2.30 in social and health value for every $1 invested (Clark et al., 2024; Case Study 9).

Identity also has a community-level dimension: the story a community holds about itself. This shared identity sits in the community conditions ring of Figure 12. A strong personal identity in farming supports a stronger community narrative, and a strong community identity, in turn, helps farmers work out who they are.

The model is deliberately simple, and is evident across every country I visited. A farmer, a neighbour, a community group, an advisor or a policy maker can use this model to reflect on their own community and see what is being built and what is being lost, and from there where the work lies to support wellbeing.

Social capital: bonding and bridging

In any rural community, you see and feel social capital before you can even name it. A neighbour lending you a field bin, a tractor stuck on the side of the road that someone stops for, a lasagne at your door when there has been a tough week. Rural people often describe these as ‘just what we do’. But that framing can hide something important, these acts usually happen through trust and familiarity built over time. You lend the field bin to the neighbour you know will look after it and bring it back in the same condition they borrowed it. That trust has to be built, and for someone new to a community, or someone who hasn’t found their way in yet, that goodwill isn’t quite as automatic.

These small acts are social capital: the ties between people and the goodwill that runs along them (Putnam, 2000).

Putnam (2000) distinguished two kinds of social capital, bonding ties and bridging ties, and a healthy community needs both. Bonding ties are the close ties within a group: the people who know your history (sometimes a little too much), who help in the middle of harvest without being asked, who sit themselves at your kitchen table without phoning ahead. They give a person steadiness, identity and the sense of being known. Bridging ties reach across groups: a relative in another district, a travelling agronomist, an exchange student who returns with new ideas, a new friend from a study tour. They give perspective, opportunity and exposure to ways of thinking a community might otherwise not have. Bonding-only communities risk becoming insular and exclusive; bridging-only communities can lose their core.

The strongest communities have both, working together. But it is important to understand that someone new to a community, particularly a migrant, often arrives with neither kind of tie. Strong communities recognise that gap and do the work of building bridges, rather than waiting for newcomers to find their own way in. Lou at Lameroo

Forward, outlined earlier, is a great example of this, done successfully through the playgroup.

Trust in practice

Beneath each form of social capital is trust. Trust is instinctive in rural communities, something hard to measure and also tricky to build deliberately.

A conversation with Courtney Bailey at Voconiq showed me how both can be done. Voconiq's research on trust between rural Australia and the wider community has gathered more than thirty thousand responses over six years. Trust in rural industries often comes down to two practical things. The first is procedural fairness: people feeling heard, respected and able to influence the decisions that affect them. The second is distributional fairness: the benefits and the costs being shared in ways that are recognised as fair. When both are present, trust grows. When either is missing, trust falls, regardless of how strong the bonding or bridging ties are. Voconiq's approach also examines trust across three broad qualities: whether an industry is seen as competent, as acting with integrity and as demonstrating humanity.

The same data identifies an important gap worth noting. Farmers can say they feel undervalued or poorly understood by the wider public. This can sit in contrast to Voconiq's findings that a large majority of Australians hold positive attitudes towards farmers. Courtney described this as the void in the middle: the space between what farmers feel and what the public actually believes.

All of this matters for wellbeing. Procedural and distributional fairness are not just formal policy terms. They are the everyday experience of being heard and being treated fairly, and both have measurable effects on mental health. Closing the void between rural people and the wider population means a farmer can feel seen for the work they do, and being seen and supported are among the crucial protective factors that buffer a person from poor mental health (Goffin, 2014). ifarmwell's research reinforces this. When farmers feel proud of their industry, their self-efficacy and their wellbeing improve. Their farmer storytelling project, featuring more than 80 Australian farmers, is one practical example of creating the spaces where farmers can be seen and heard within their own industry (ifarmwell, n.d.).

Communities with strong relationships and high levels of trust are better able to respond to adversity and recover more quickly (Aldrich, 2012; Madsen and O'Mullan, 2014). This also applies to the services around farmers. In Australia, Dr Jacki Schirmer's recent work found that farming and mental health supports need to be consistently available, not constantly stood up and stood down in response to each new challenge (Schirmer, 2026). When they are not, farmers can perceive it as a lack of trust in them. Trust takes time and builds slowly, through small, repeated actions. The person who shows up at every working bee, the neighbour who stops for a chat on the side of the road even when they are busy. None of these actions are groundbreaking, but that is the point. They are the ordinary deposits into the community's wellbeing account.

Shared adversity can also forge strong bonds and trust. In Zimbabwe I witnessed friendships forged during the land reforms, through experiences no one should have to endure, and those ties were unshakeable. It could be felt without words, the deep sadness in their eyes matched with a love and respect I could hardly begin to imagine.

Crisis can deepen connection, and the bonds forged under adversity are real. But they come at a human cost no community should have to live through if it can be avoided.



Figure 13. Helen Goodwin, Nuffield Zimbabwe (L) shares insightful stories with our GFP group. (Source: author)

Why this matters for farmer wellbeing

The best time to build a community, or personal wellbeing for that matter, is not in the middle of a crisis. It is in the years before that. Wendy Madsen and Catherine O'Mullan's 2014 study of Theodore in Queensland's Banana Shire, after the 2010–11 floods, makes an important point. Social capital is what a community draws on in adversity, but it needs to be built in the quiet years, well before the flood arrives.

The theory, the evidence and the global learnings all suggest the same concept: strong communities are the foundation of thriving farmers. Knowing the theory is one thing. Seeing programs around the world put it into practice is what added real value to this study.

Section 3 – What works: strategies and transferable models

Programs that work well

What works becomes clearer when we step away from our own biases and take a look with that 'balcony effect', raised earlier. Programs from across the globe, including New Zealand, Canada and even here in our own backyard in Australia, offer strategies worth applying to our wellbeing approach.

One framework that has stayed with me is Sir Mason Durie's Te Whare Tapa Whā, a Māori model of health as a house of four walls: taha tinana (physical), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional), taha whānau (family and social), and taha wairua (spiritual). If one wall is weak, the house cannot stand. The model is now widely used across New Zealand's health system and has influenced many of the wellbeing frameworks I encountered later. Looking at wellbeing holistically like this, rather than as just one part of life, is common among the best programs I visited.



Figure 14. Te Whare Tapa Whā, Sir Mason Durie's four-walled Māori model of health. (Source: Hauora Hub, n.d.)

Behind every great program I researched you will find a fundamental layer of why it actually works. The most effective approaches build on the everyday, often invisible ways communities support each other. They use trusted conduits and are often peer-to-peer in their design.

Farmstrong, launched in New Zealand in 2015, is a national rural wellbeing program built around the Five Ways to Wellbeing. Led by Gerard Vaughan with long-term backing from ACC and FMG, it has a strong evidence base, including an independently evaluated return of about $7.85 for every $1 invested (Vaughan, G. Farmstrong). It is now being replicated in Scotland and is informing Australian rural wellbeing work through the Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australian Agriculture's five principles (Case Study 1).

Surfing for Farmers (SFF) was founded by Stephen Thomson in Gisborne in 2018. Once a week during the surfable months, boards and wetsuits are provided free of charge to any farmer who comes down to the beach, followed by a barbecue. Run by local volunteers, it has spread to multiple coastal sites across NZ, and its preventive,

no-barrier, community-led design carries many of the eleven principles explained below (Case Study 2).



Figure 15. The author with Stephen Thomson, Surfing for Farmers founder in Gisborne, New Zealand. (Source: author)

Canada has useful examples of how they are tailoring support into a form farmers will actually use.

The Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program in Canada offers free, confidential, one-on-one support from counsellors with agricultural backgrounds, and co-founder Gerry Friesen's openness about his own anxiety and depression gives it credibility (Case Study 3).

The National Farmer Mental Health Alliance's Be Farm Well app is there for the times of day, often between two and four in the morning, when a farmer needs support and no other service is open. Its Agriculture Informed Therapy™ training means a farmer who reaches out for counselling meets a therapist who understands farming (Case Study 4).

The Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (CCAW) runs a national crisis line, staffed by more than 250 farm-trained counsellors, and trains agronomists, milk truck drivers, advisors and loan officers as "adjacent professionals" who often see distress before a family member or GP does (Case Study 7).

An Australian example with these principles of peer level work is ifarmwell. Developed by Associate Professor Kate Gunn, ifarmwell began as a free online toolkit informed by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. It has expanded well beyond the original website, with content now co-designed with farmers and delivered through interactive tools, text prompts, podcasts, workshops, videos and the Weather it Together lived-experience campaign. It puts farmer voice at the front while keeping clinical expertise scaffolded behind, and researchers and practitioners I met internationally named it as a strong model worth replicating (Case Study 6).

Key elements of an effective program

Across the global evidence and the case studies featured, eleven principles emerge that set the most effective programs apart. Bringing these together, Figure 16 (below) sets out a framework for effective program design, featuring eleven elements summarised into four groups: how to reach farmers, timing, program design, and how it all fits together.

How to reach farmers draws on Aristotle's ethos, pathos and logos. Trusted messengers at the peer level, language farmers already use, and content designed using credible evidence (explained further below).

Timing means reaching people before crisis rather than after it. Surfing for Farmers and Fat Farmers are wellbeing-by-stealth in practice; the surf or fitness session is the obvious purpose, and the wellbeing benefit is what happens alongside it. Timing also means long-term, flexible funding rather than tap-on-then-off funding cycles.

Program design means strengths-based approaches that lead from wellness, capability and hope rather than illness or deficit, using synergic satisfiers that meet several needs at once and multi-channel delivery, designed with community and adapted to local needs.

H**ow it all fits together** means coordinating and collaborating across organisations to reduce overwhelm, and measuring holistically, both explored further below.

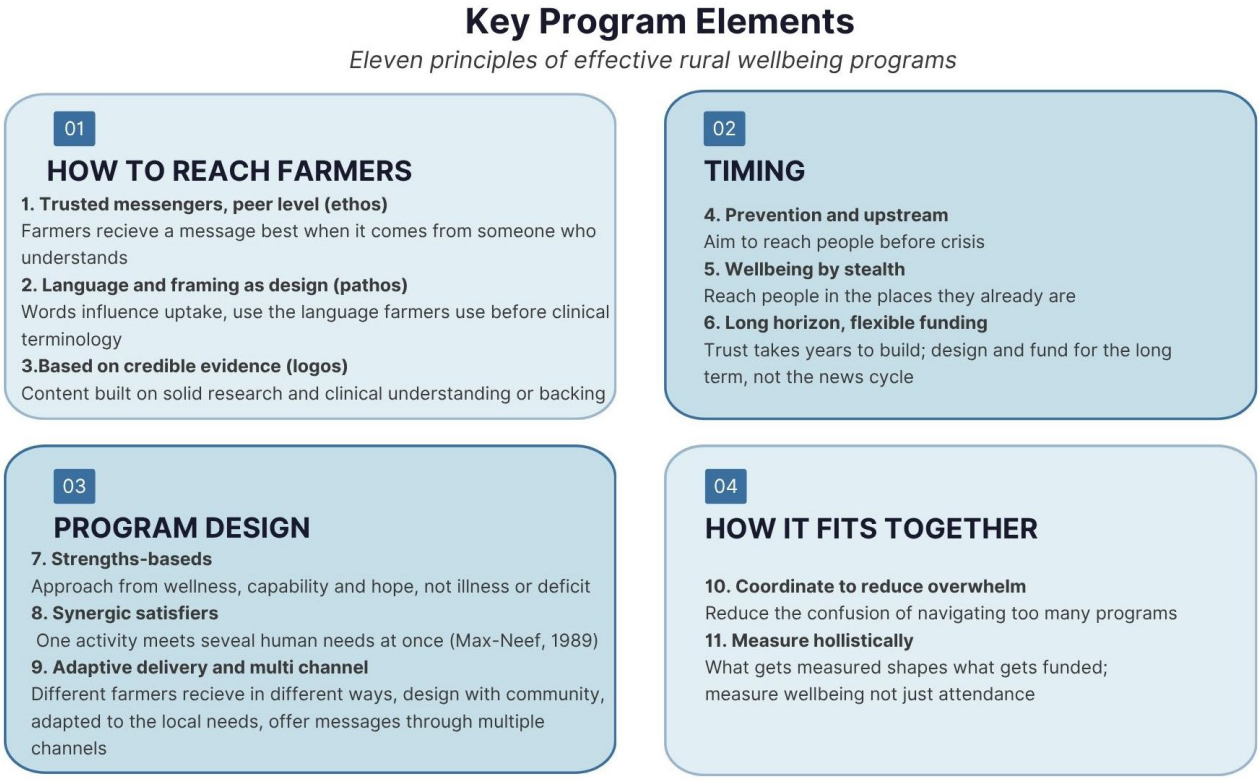


Figure 16. Eleven principles of effective rural wellbeing programs, grouped by how to reach farmers, timing, program design, and how it all fits together. (Source: author)

Trust, empathy and the importance of facts

Messages about wellbeing that successfully resonate with farmers generally do so using three methods at once. Aristotle named them more than two thousand years ago, in his work on rhetoric; ethos (trust), pathos (empathy that helps the message land), and logos (the facts and frameworks that give the message credibility). In a clinical setting, where the client has actively approached the support and is ready to receive it, this can work in sequence. In everyday rural life, where the goal is to reach people before crisis rather than after, all three need to be present at once. Trust allows the conversation to happen, empathy helps the listener stay engaged, and facts and lived experience provide credibility and ensure the message is delivered safely. Without those guardrails, even well-meaning peer support can leave someone even more vulnerable and at risk.

Sharon May at Kingsclere Counselling, in Hampshire, UK, described this perfectly whilst she gave me a walking tour of her farm. She told me that the clinical level has knowledge but not always trust, while the boots-on-the-ground level has trust but not always the expert knowledge. She explained the importance of finding the bridge between the two. That is why ifarmwell in Australia works so well: it does both (Case Study 6).

I have also noticed this same principle in the way the ‘Bush Tribe’, part of Sober in the Country (SITC) is designed. Shanna Whan AM built SITC on the belief that “we’re stronger, together, and healing happens in community, not in isolation” (Sober in the Country, n.d.). The peer support that members give each other is a big part of what the Bush Tribe offers. The online group is consciously designed and immaculately governed, with moderators who are carefully trained with clear guardrails and an understanding of the limits of what they can and cannot offer. Members speak honestly and only ever from their own experience, and never to ‘tell’ or ‘preach’, but they do so with a framework that knows when to guide to professional support, and how.

Stephen at FCN gave me another worthwhile perspective. He told me that mental health first aid is just first aid: you stop the bleeding while you wait for the paramedic, you do not have to be the expert in that situation. The discipline is to know your lane, to listen and signpost, and to trust that the important layer of clinical care will be there when it is needed. That discipline is the important part that can allow lived experience to be effective without doing harm along the way.

Tim Morden, a Canadian farmer who generously shared with me his story of recovery from depression and alcoholism, made a clear observation that must be considered if we want to reach the people in need. National crisis lines and support numbers, in his view, are not utilised well enough by farmers. The barrier is not information; farmers know the numbers exist. It is lack of trust and understanding. More on Tim’s story in Appendix 2, Case Study 8.

The two pathways to farmer wellbeing, peer and professional, are not in competition; in fact, they are more effective together. A peer-to-peer, boots-on-the-ground approach is one of the most powerful pathways to preventative farmer wellbeing, and it is the focus of much of this report. But that power depends on the safety scaffolding that surrounds it, with trust, empathy and facts working together. In this way, someone can recognise when more is needed and help direct a farmer toward expert support. For the purpose of this report, I have deliberately left the expert work to those already doing it well.

Coordination in practice

There is a great deal of important work being done in these and many other examples. One consideration that ran through all of them is how often the people doing the supporting were carrying their own load. Stephen Thomson from SFF was upfront about the risk this poses. The more services a program tries to run, the more risk there is of volunteers being overused. The discipline he applies is to keep sight of the purpose of the group, keeping the focus simple and steady before rushing to expand it. The work cannot survive if the people doing it do not; protecting volunteers as carefully as programs protect the farmers they support is vital.

An example of what collaboration in practice can look like emerged in New Zealand in July 2026, when SFF joined forces with Rural Riders, a mountain-biking program with the same purpose of getting farmers off the farm and into a shared activity. Rather than running in parallel and competing for the same volunteer time and funding, the two now sit under a ‘For Farmers’ umbrella, active in 37 coastal and inland locations (Uys, 2026; Case Study 2).

The same collaboration is happening here in Australia. Fat Farmers, mentioned earlier, integrated with Active Farmers during late 2025 to early 2026 and together they now reach around 95 rural communities (Anderson, 2025; Case Study 10). On either side of the Tasman, the same principle is playing out: eliminate duplication of boards, funding requests and administrative overhead, and allow the organisations to work together for greater impact.

Language, measurement and the bigger picture

Two common elements stood out within the most effective programs. The first is language, and it has been noticed throughout my study. How a program is named shapes who is drawn toward it. The second is measurement: what gets measured influences what gets funded.

Let’s look at language first. Mary O’Brien, an Australian spray contractor turned wellbeing speaker who has toured the country helping rural people understand wellbeing, frames the moment of stress as “are you bogged, mate?” The phrase did not come up with new vocabulary; instead, it used one farmers were already familiar with and could easily relate to. The concept has been picked up widely across rural Australia. It has even been used in an upcoming city-based radio station’s mental health promotion, further highlighting the importance of this evidence. Words that have meaning without the judgement, that are not cliché, and invite people in without dragging them, are having great impact for getting farmers into the wellbeing space in the first place.

I came across another example of this during my time in Canada. The Canadian rural wellbeing sector has, in some contexts, reframed ‘mental health’ as ‘brain health’, particularly when working with men. The physical-mechanical framing makes the conversation feel more familiar, more like talking about a part of the body than talking about a state of mind. It draws on the same principle Mary O’Brien uses with language in Australia, from a different angle. Language can also work against a program, when words like 'wellness' or 'mental health' carry unintended judgement.

Measurement is the second element. Independently evaluated returns are not always extracted from program outcomes in agriculture, but that clarity is what makes a program fundable. Farmstrong's evaluation, noted earlier, shows the value of this.

In 2014, PwC published a workplace mental health return-on-investment analysis for Beyond Blue and the National Mental Health Commission (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014). It found an average return of $2.30 per dollar invested across Australian workplaces. The same analysis, applied to agriculture, returned a ratio close to one, and on a per-business-size basis sometimes lower still. The interpretation matters: the activities being measured (employer-led mental health initiatives in HR-supported workplaces) bear little resemblance to the everyday wellbeing reality of a farmer. Agriculture needs its own measurement frame, one that can carry the kinds of outcomes that programs like Farmstrong, Surfing for Farmers, ifarmwell and Fat Farmers are actually producing.

Measuring holistically means tracking elements of wellbeing, rather than counting how many people walked through the door, or focusing on dollars alone. The Personal Wellbeing Index and Sense of Belonging measures used in Schirmer's Regional Wellbeing Survey are good examples of measurement that captures something real. The Rural Wellbeing Toolkit by Luke and colleagues (2023) at the University of Southern Queensland holds a similar holistic four-area model. These instruments are not perfect, but they are pointing in the right direction. They are measuring people and communities, not just programs.

When these eleven principles (Figure 16) come together, they form a blueprint: meeting farmers where they are, using their own language, at the right moment, designed with care, and held together as a coherent system. What is needed now is not to invent more programs, but to recognise what is already working, to support the people doing it, and to commit the resources that allow it to last through appropriate measurement and evaluation.

Navigating the overwhelm

There is no shortage of programs aimed at supporting rural wellbeing in Australia. A basic directory of Australian rural mental health and wellbeing services lists more than seventy separate programs, some of which are listed under Resources at the end of this report. A comprehensive directory would run into the hundreds. What is presenting as an issue, however, is clarity about which program an individual should choose to engage with, when, and how.

The rural wellbeing space is full of organisations competing for a small funding bucket, sometimes duplicating each other's work. Information overload, traditional barriers to help-seeking, and the tap-on-then-off nature of much of the funding leave good programs unable to reach the people who need them most. It's not more programs that farmers need. It's better coordination between the ones that already exist.

Australia has begun to respond at the sector level. The Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australian Agriculture, an alliance endorsed by more than sixty industry bodies, has called for a national coordinated response of $50 million over five years (Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australian Agriculture, 2025). On 23 June 2026, the Coalition presented its case at the NFF and Suicide Prevention Australia Parliamentary Breakfast at Parliament House. Mike Guerin, CEO of the NFF, framed

the moment: “Agriculture feeds this nation. The people who do that work deserve a system that looks after them in return” (National Farmers’ Federation, 2026). Critically, the request is for coordination and collaboration between the many well-meaning services already operating, not another new program.

Section 4 – Vibrant communities, thriving farmers

The keys: bringing it all together

Vibrant communities and thriving farmers are two very large and complex ideas on their own. My goal was never to completely solve either of them in isolation, but to look closely at how they intersect. I believed that if the two were as intertwined as I first hypothesised, then some real insights might be found by studying the way they influence each other.

In every country I visited, from kitchen tables to boardrooms, the topic drew people in. I did not need to convince anyone that community and farmer wellbeing were connected. The language and local style varied, but the level of interest was constant, solid evidence of a universal need.

Although the topic is universal, the solution to it is not. Communities are deeply individual, with local needs. A Hutterite colony in Saskatchewan will not share the same needs or answers as a small town in the South Australian Mallee, nor a rural Zimbabwean village. What we can find, looking across all these different global models, is familiar patterns rather than rigid templates, patterns that can be picked up and adapted to a particular place. From all the theory and evidence I saw, some patterns were noticeable. Thriving farmers and vibrant communities were helping strengthen each other. Simplifying that pattern gives us a blueprint of the key things worth considering.

The keys to thriving farmers

Thriving is not a word you will often hear a farmer use about themselves. Ask how they are going and the answer is usually “not bad”, or “keeping busy”, or “can’t complain”. What thriving actually looks like is a farmer who stops for lunch more days than not, a parent who prioritises the school concert ahead of an extra farm job, someone who says yes to the coffee at Fat Farmers, a Friday surf or the working bee at the footy club, not always but often enough. Someone who can name their values and their why, even if they never say it out loud. A thriving farmer is not one who never struggles; they are one who has a clear reason why, a way of keeping their own wellbeing in credit, and enough people around them to support them through the low weeks.

From each of the conversations had across the globe and through every Nuffield visit, five keys emerged as a simple guide to farmer wellbeing (Figure 17): purpose, connection, physical health, regulation and giving. None of these keys work in isolation. Each one is simple on its own, but it is the way they work together that makes a farmer, and by extension a community, thrive.

Purpose

The first key is a why worth getting up for. Every farmer I have met has one, whether they name it out loud or not. Some are unashamedly clear, like Alex and Emily Crawley

in the UK, who talk about theirs as "to grow food and work with nature". Others carry it more privately: to leave the family farm in better shape than they inherited it, to raise their kids in a rural place, to build something that outlasts them. Whatever the wording, purpose is what carries a farmer through the tough times. Sarah Crosthwaite, 2023 Nuffield Scholar, identified that in Australian agriculture, one of the strongest expressions of purpose is business capability. She has written (Crosthwaite, 2024) that a farmer with a strong understanding of their finances, planning and strategic decisions carries a sense of control that is itself a form of wellbeing. Purpose is not only philosophical; it can be practical too.

Connection

Every thriving farmer I met had connection built into their week deliberately, not left to chance. It might be a phone call to a neighbour, or a chat with somebody who understands what bad grain prices feel like. It might be a WhatsApp group of scholars and farmers scattered across the world. Connection is not one single relationship; it is the small habits of turning up, of picking up the phone, and of being reachable when someone else picks up theirs.

Physical health

The ‘wellbeing account’ introduced in Section 1 is built through everyday actions that look after the body and mind. Staying curious to understand what works for the individual, with simple boosts like those in Figure 6.

Regulation and self-awareness

A thriving farmer takes the time to understand themselves: what is filling their day, what is draining it, and noticing before things get out of hand. Tracy Secombe at Farm Owners Academy in Australia works with farmers on the internal side of the business, the mindset and self-awareness that influence every decision. She talks about quietening the mind-noise to hear the inner voice. Akin to Mary O'Brien's "getting bogged", the farmer who checks in with themselves is the farmer who can act before things get stuck. Time off the farm, where practical, is part of this practice, as is anything that grounds you: a walk, a paddle, a fishing trip, or an hour with a book on the veranda. Regulation should not be seen as weakness; it is an important skill that lets everything else in the wellbeing account keep working.

Giving

Something special happens when a farmer does things for someone else. The head lifts, the overthinking gets a break, and the problem that was so big at two in the morning gets smaller because there was someone else’s fence to help mend, or someone else’s tractor to help pull out of the mud, or someone else’s kid to teach how to kick a footy. Frankl also observed that meaning is found as much in what we give to the world as in what we take from it, and Farmstrong’s Five Ways to Wellbeing put it

in one word: give. It is the key that links thriving farmers to vibrant communities, because giving is where individual wellbeing becomes community strength.

"If they have a dollar they would give ten cents to ten people, if we have a dollar, we want to make two!" Matte Kirk (pers. comm., 2025) on the giving mindset of Māori people



Figure 17. Five keys to a thriving farmer: purpose, the wellbeing account, connection, regulation, and giving. (Source: author)

This is not a comprehensive list, but a deliberately simple guide (represented in Figure 17) that can be followed without the risk of overwhelm.

The keys to vibrant communities

"No agreement exists about a universal definition of community wellbeing" (Forjaz et al., 2011, p. 734), and perhaps this is partly due to the individual and complex nature communities hold. We can start by thinking about what makes up a vibrant community. Vibrant is a word that evokes feeling; you can almost feel it before you can describe it. Maybe it is a main street with active businesses, people passing by with enough time to say hello and stop for a chat. A gym whose members grab a coffee together after the session. Regular events with willing volunteers who inject energy into the town without being coerced into the jobs.

A vibrant community is more than the sum of its people. It has a character of its own, and across my travels, five keys to a vibrant community emerged consistently: infrastructure, trust, exchange, identity, and the people who hold it together.

Infrastructure

Every thriving community needs somewhere to gather: a pub, a shed, a hall, a footy oval. The thriving communities I visited had them in good working order. The declining ones had lost them, or were struggling to hold on to enough people to fill them. The communities moving up the continuum were deliberately identifying the need and building such places.

Trust

Trust is difficult to build and easy to lose. The same three trust dimensions from Section 2, competence, integrity and humanity, also apply at community level. A community earns trust the same way an individual does: by consistently doing what it says, being honest when things go wrong, and treating its people with respect and as more than a resource. When trust is present, everything else gets easier: volunteers turn up, programs get used, and change is accepted rather than resisted. When it is missing, programs, policy and funding will be futile.

Exchange between and within communities

Communities cannot thrive by looking only inward. One that keeps its networks open, through exchange programs, sporting fixtures, study tours and new arrivals, keeps its outlook wider. Rural Australia's demographic is changing, and newcomers to our small towns often come from further afield. The communities that thrive are the ones that welcome them in. That openness is what keeps a rural community alive.

Shared identity

Every vibrant community I visited had a shared story about itself, a sense of who they were and what they were there for. That story took very different forms: a purposeful shared life within a Hutterite colony in Canada or a farmers' choir singing on a Britain's Got Talent stage. Or it could be a shared surf culture in Gisborne on the east coast of New Zealand, the first place in the world to see the sun each day, where surfing itself became the foundation for SFF. Each had a warm, welcoming invitation to belong. Communities that make it easy to belong hold a strength for their people that services cannot compete with.

The people who hold it together

Behind every strong community is its people, they are the connecting piece the other keys depend on. Strong communities have a local champion or two who have passion and drive, and who sometimes, without knowing it, become leaders. The volunteer who runs the surf group or the neighbour who always checks in. A vibrant community looks after the people doing the caring, so they can continue to do it.

A community strong enough to hold its people can also, in conflict, work against them. In a small town there are only so many places to turn. Newcomers can feel it deeply, and people strongly embedded in a community can seem friendly yet distant, with invisible boundaries that take time to learn. My New Zealand contacts insisted that a report about strong communities failing to name this other side would be worth less, and they were right. A vibrant community is not one without flaws; it is one that recognises them and keeps building on its strengths.

Community strengthening is a wellbeing strategy

The concept of community strengthening, as used in this report, means the deliberate, everyday work of building the ties, trust and infrastructure that allow people in a community to support one another. These small, repeated acts of gathering, including, and showing up turn a group of individuals into something bigger than themselves, a community with the capacity to support its own members.

The five keys to thriving and the five keys to community are not two separate lists. They work together, and giving is the link between them.

The relationship runs both ways. The everyday work of gathering and including one another, done well, meets the same human needs that individual wellbeing services exist to support. Where community is strong, the pressure on the clinical end of the system eases. Where it is not, even well-intended initiatives struggle to land. Community strengthening has to be a deliberate choice, made with an understanding of how far its impact can reach.

Do More Ag, a national farmer mental health organisation in Canada, describes it this way: "Community activates a sense of belonging and hope. When we feel connected, we're more likely to reach out, show up, and support one another" (Do More Agriculture Foundation, 2025).

There is a phrase I heard early in my Nuffield travels that has not left me. Stephen Thomson said his job was not to be the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. Every model that works in this space, from a Friday afternoon surf, to a Tuesday morning coffee at Fat Farmers, to a peer network group spanning the country, is a piece of the fence at the top. The recommendations in this report are ways to build more of that fence, in more places, together.

An ideal future for Australian farmers and rural communities is not something we have to imagine from scratch. It is already visible in the places where these keys are in action, where farmers thrive and communities are vibrant, each strengthening the other over time. Getting there is not about starting something new. It is about recognising and supporting the work many rural communities are already doing when they are at their best.

Conclusions

This Nuffield study set out to understand what supports the wellbeing of farmers, and the role a strong community plays in producing it. It drew on eighteen months of global travel to find the patterns that appear in rural communities where farmers thrive. Six key insights emerged.

Community strengthening is a wellbeing strategy in its own right. A vibrant rural community does not just support the wellbeing of its people, it produces it. And thriving farmers, in turn, are how a community's strength is produced. The two grow together.

Wellbeing is universal, but its satisfiers are individual. Every farmer I met was invested in the question of what makes a life well lived. The difference was not the needs themselves, but the local and individual ways they are met. There is no single wellbeing formula that works for every farmer or every community.

Purpose is where wellbeing begins. The farmers doing well knew their why. Purpose makes the everyday work meaningful and the hard times bearable, and it does not have to be fixed to farming.

The everyday keys are simple, and best kept that way. Physical health, connection with others, and regulation of the mind came up again and again. What makes them work is consistency, not complexity, and the language and support that surround them.

Communities are not fixed on the thriving–surviving–declining continuum. A community's future is not decided by its size, its location, or its history. It is shaped by what its people and institutions do every day.

Peer-to-peer support, with the right guardrails, is one of the most powerful pathways to farmer wellbeing. Farmers listen to other farmers first. What makes peer support effective is the safety scaffolding around it: trained ambassadors, clear boundaries on what they can and cannot offer, and a bridge to expert support when it is needed. Peer and professional pathways are not in competition; they are stronger together.

Rural Australia has a lot going for it, from its capable people to the shared purpose of feeding a nation. This report looks at what is working, aiming to reduce the overwhelm, not add to it.

The recommendations that follow require something from every level: the individual, the community, the sector, and the systems that fund and support them. The rewards of getting this right extend beyond wellbeing itself: better farm business viability, stronger community function and an industry that the next generation wants to be part of. That is the future worth investing in, and one every rural community has the capacity to build.

Recommendations

Know your why and fill your wellbeing account.

- Understand your own needs and what satisfies them.
- Know your *why*: the purpose that keeps you going through the tough times.
- Add to your wellbeing account daily with small deposits: movement, food, sleep, connection, learning something new.
- Prioritise connection. It takes intention and effort.
- Notice yourself, the things around you and take time to regulate.
- Do something for someone else. Giving is where individual wellbeing becomes community strength.

Simplify and reduce overwhelm using language that works for farmers.

- Design services and funding so they are easy to understand, access and sustain, aiming to simplify, not add another layer of complexity.
- Make language part of program design. Reach farmers in their own language, and in the ways and places where they already meet.

Build in peer-to-peer connection.

- Peer-to-peer networks are the most trusted and durable form of support farmers have and they catch the people least likely to reach out themselves. Recognise, connect and support them.
- Keep trust, empathy and facts present together. Peer programs need credible scaffolding behind them, so peers can safely guide farmers to expert support, and that support is there when it’s needed.
- Integrate peer components, such as peer-based mentor groups, into existing programs and services.
- Use structured peer groups alongside informal networks. Mix enterprises and avoid grouping geographic neighbours so honesty can build.

Coordinate and collaborate, do not compete.

- Protect and scale what is already working and fund the coordination and collaboration between existing services ahead of new programs that may duplicate them.
- Fund for the long horizon, not the news cycle. Programs that appear in one crisis and then disappear break trust and add cost through duplication.
- Ask publicly funded organisations to stay true to their purpose, collaborate rather than compete, and ensure outcomes are being met honestly.

Strengthen community and support the people who hold it together.

- Protect and rebuild the hidden infrastructure in community where ordinary conversation happens. Promote everyday connection built around shared purpose, not just mental-health framing.
- Resource the people, not just the programs, with administrative support and less red tape, so community bodies can protect their energy for the work itself.

- Support the volunteer leaders and community champions. Consolidate committees, break roles into bite-size chunks, and write clear job descriptions so volunteering is accessible at every level of capacity.
- Welcome the changing shape of rural community. How a community welcomes and integrates new arrivals will define which communities thrive over the coming decade.

Measure holistically, in a way that fits agriculture.

- What gets measured gets funded. Look beyond attendance using the holistic wellbeing measures already available.
- Build a measurement frame that fits family-farm reality, not the office-workplace model behind standard return-on-investment calculations.

Resources

Researching farmer wellbeing has brought me into contact with many valuable resources. There are many available, and they can be selected based on what works for the individual. The following is a list of some to explore further.

Lifeline Australia	13 11 14	www.lifeline.org.au
Beyond Blue		www.beyondblue.org.au
Mensline Australia	1300 78 99 78	www.mensline.org.au
Rural Aid		www.ruralaid.org.au
Rural Health Connect		www.ruralhealthconnect.com.au
This is a conversation starter		www.tiacs.org
ifarmwell		www.ifarmwell.com.au
National Centre for Farmer Health		www.farmerhealth.org.au
Farm Life Psych		www.stephschmidt.com.au
Family and Business Mentors (FaB)		www.pir.sa.gov.au
Enable ag		www.enableag.com.au
Everymind		www.everymind.org.au
(rural agribusiness wellbeing project)		
Head to Health		www.headtohealth.gov.au
Mindspot		www.mindspot.org.au
Black Dog Institute		www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
Agmind Australia		www.agmind.com.au
Fat Farmers Rural Health Initiative		www.fatfarmers.com.au
Are you bogged mate?		www.areyouboggedmate.com.au
The Unbreakable Farmer		www.theunbreakablefarmer.com.au
Farmer mates mental health		www.gpsa.com.au
The Ripple Effect		www.therippleeffect.com.au
Motherland		www.motherlandaustralia.com.au
Sober in the Country		www.soberinthecountry.org
Six Bs		www.6bs.com.au
Taking Stock		www.takingstock.community
Breakthrough Mental Health Foundation		www.breakthroughfoundation.org.au
Open Road Counselling		www.openroadcounselling.com.au

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Appendix 1: A Farmer Guide to Wellbeing

This handy printable is designed as a takeaway: stick it on the fridge. Find what works for you, individually, and invest in that regularly. Keep it, and the list of resources handy.

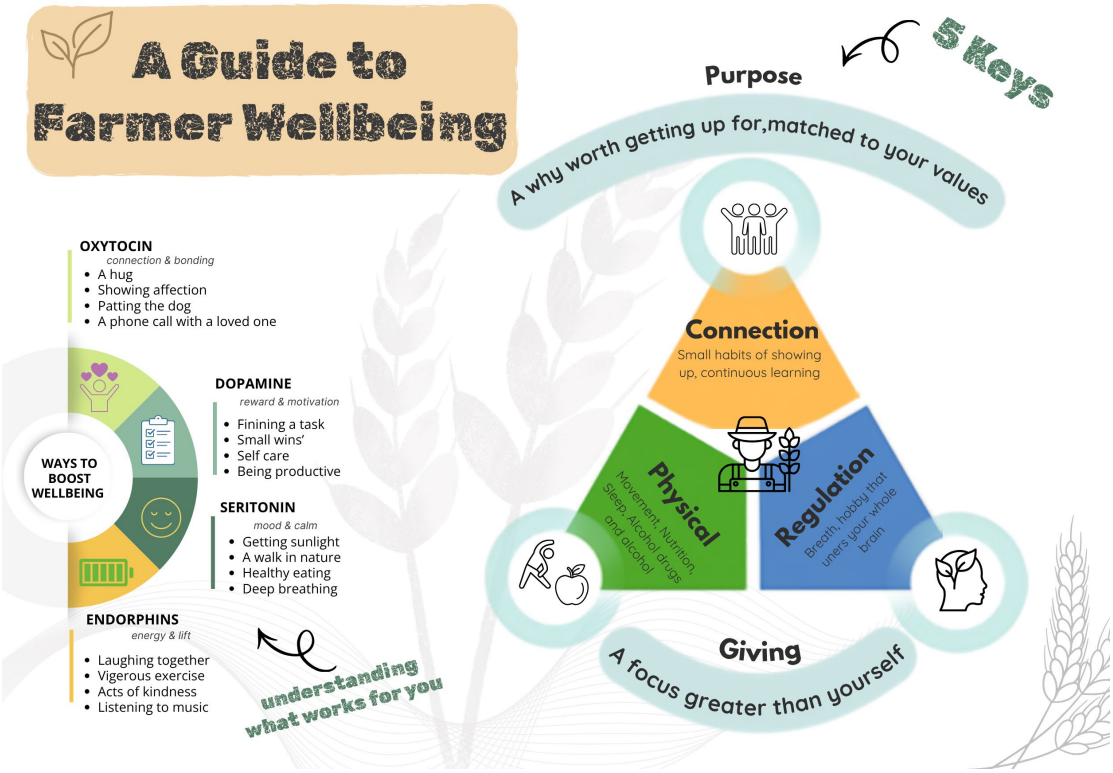


Figure 18. Simple guide to the keys to wellbeing and ways to boost wellbeing through hormones as a printable page. (Source: author)

Appendix 2: Case studies

Ten case studies are referenced throughout the report. Each illustrates several of the eleven principles introduced in Section 3.

Case Study 1 – Farmstrong (New Zealand)

Location	New Zealand (national)
Established	2015
Backing	Founding partner FMG (Farmers Mutual Group), strategic partner ACC (Accident Compensation Corporation)
Leadership	Gerard Vaughan (Chief Executive), Pete Frizzel (Chair)
Focus	Preventive rural wellbeing support for farmers
Website	farmstrong.co.nz

Background

Farmstrong launched in 2015 as a national rural wellbeing program in New Zealand. It was developed by farmers for farmers, with stable long-term backing from founding partner FMG, a farmer-owned mutual insurance group and ACC, which joined in 2016. The program is led by Gerard Vaughan, whose philosophy alongside wellbeing science guides much of the work: *you can control your internal world even when everything is changing in the outside world*. Farmstrong works from a preventive standpoint, supporting farmers in maintaining wellbeing in everyday life, rather than waiting until clinical intervention is needed.

How it works – The Five Ways to Wellbeing

Farmstrong is built around the Five Ways to Wellbeing, a framework developed by the New Economics Foundation for the UK Government's Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing (Aked et al., 2008). The Five Ways (shown in Figure 19) are five simple, everyday actions that, done regularly, add up to better mental and physical wellbeing over time. Farmstrong uses them as the everyday deposits into what it calls a farmer's *wellbeing account*.

1. Connect. Spend time with the people who matter to you. Family around the dinner table, a phone call to a mate, a coffee with a neighbour, a chat at the sale yards. Strong relationships are one of the most reliable predictors of wellbeing, and they buffer stress when things get tough.

2. Keep active. Move your body regularly. Farming is physical work, but not always the right kind of physical work: hours on the tractor, repetitive lifting, or the sedentary part of the ever-increasing office work all take their toll. Farmstrong encourages movement that resets the body and mind, whether that is walking, cycling, gym, sport or a swim.

3. Take notice. Be present in the moment and notice the world around you. Small acts of noticing, a sunrise over the paddock, the smell of rain, a good cup of coffee or a job well done all build up a store of positive experience that helps offset the weight of the hard things.

4. Keep learning. Set yourself small challenges and try new things. A course, a new skill on farm, a book, a hobby, a farm walk on someone else's place. Learning gives a sense of purpose and progress, and helps you farm smarter.

5. Give. Do something for someone else, without expecting anything back. Volunteer at the local club, help a neighbour, share what you know or offer time to your community. Giving builds connection, lifts mood, and reinforces your sense of value.

Part of Farmstrong's practical genius is that none of these Five Ways requires a clinic or a diagnosis. They are things farmers can do every day, on their own terms, in the context of their own farm. That is also what allows a wellbeing conversation to happen, at the yards or at the kitchen table, long before reaching crisis.

The program offers practical, farmer-recognisable activities and prompts, including:

Stay present – for example stop to listen to the birds

Leave your bike ten minutes from the shed to encourage daily movement

Call some of your mates and give them permission to call you

Book an appointment with yourself to do something that tops up your wellbeing

Content is delivered through multiple channels: a network of about 22 champion farmers (including high-profile ambassadors such as former All Blacks captain Sam Whitelock), short videos, podcasts, a magazine, in-person events, and word-of-mouth. The team works to a *cook once, eat seven times* principle, where each piece of content is reused across formats to reach farmers through the channel that suits them best.

Impact

Independent evaluation by ACC and FMG provides clear evidence of program effectiveness:

82% awareness among New Zealand farmers

22% of surveyed farmers attribute personal wellbeing improvement to Farmstrong

ROI of $7.85 for every $1 invested

Why it works

Farmstrong uses many of the principles that set good rural wellbeing programs apart:

Trusted messengers (ethos): delivered by farmers and credible rural figures

Language and framing as design (pathos): a true and authentic rural tone is used throughout

Based on credible evidence (logos): built on the Five Ways to Wellbeing framework; evaluated for awareness, engagement and behaviour change, and it is research backed

Prevention and upstream: focused on everyday wellbeing and prevention

Long horizon, flexible funding: stable FMG and ACC backing for over a decade

Strengths-based: framed around capability and wellbeing, not illness

Adaptive delivery and multi-channel: reaches farmers through their preferred medium; adapted to rural NZ, and internationally replicated as principles not template

Measure holistically: uses Results Based Accountability (RBA), and both qualitative and quantitative methods to track and monitor ROI, wellbeing change and reach, alongside attendance

Transferability

Farmstrong is now being replicated as a scalable model in Scotland and is informing Australian rural wellbeing work. The Farmstrong team have been deliberate that the model is a set of principles rather than a template to copy.

Sources

Sources: Farmstrong (2022); Aked et al. (2008); Vaughan (pers. comm., 2025). Full details in References.

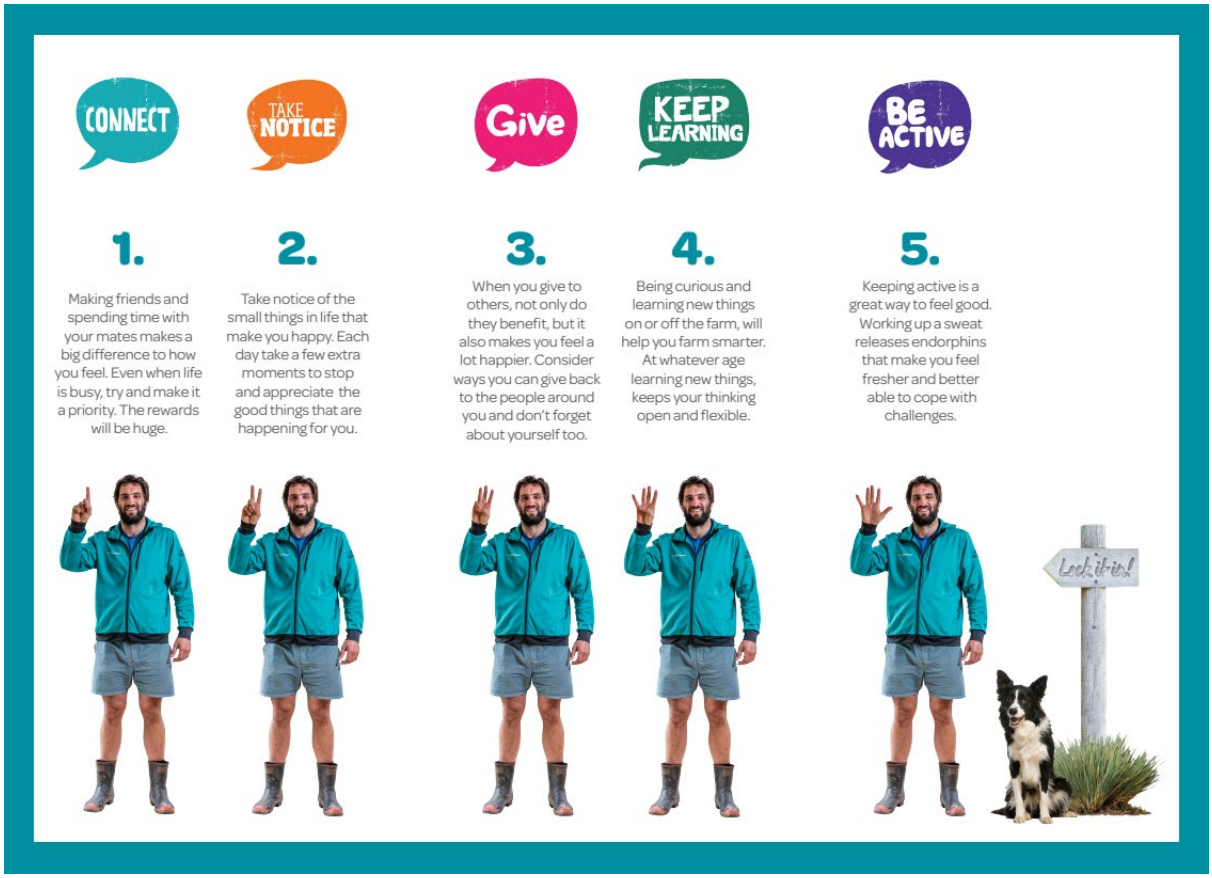


Figure 19. Farmstrong Five Ways to Wellbeing. (Source: Farmstrong, 2022)

Case Study 2 – Surfing for Farmers (New Zealand)

Location	Founded in Gisborne, New Zealand; multi-site across NZ
Established	2018
Founder	Stephen Thomson
Focus	Preventive peer-led community wellbeing through surfing and connection
Website	surfingforfarmers.com

Background

Surfing for Farmers was founded by Stephen Thomson in Gisborne, New Zealand, in 2018. Stephen grew up on a farm and now works in rural real estate and farm consultancy. He was inspired to start the program after watching the Netflix documentary *Resurface*, which followed military veterans with PTSD being given surfboards as part of their recovery. A line from that documentary stayed with him: *every day I think of suicide, now every day I want to go surfing*.

The concept is straightforward. One day a week during the surfable months, surfboards, wetsuits and qualified instructors are provided free of charge to any farmer who comes down to the beach. After the surf, a barbecue is provided, often funded and run by sponsors, giving the participants a chance to connect and catch up. Families are welcome, and the program is open to all ability levels.

How it works

Surfing for Farmers is built around three commitments: keep it simple, keep it fun, and remove barriers to entry. Stephen Thomson articulates the philosophy directly: *we don't want to be the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff*. The work is preventive, upstream of crisis, and based on community participation.

Each session is organised by a small team of local volunteers, working with surf schools, local farmers, sponsors and community groups. Volunteers are not necessarily surfers themselves but all find great satisfaction in seeing the farmers enjoy the experience. Matte Kirk, the Raglan session organiser and a surfer himself, runs the local session and also works as a Health, Safety and Wellbeing officer at Pioneer agribusiness, holding the volunteer role alongside his employment.

Matte's commitment to rural mental wellness extends well beyond the Surfing for Farmers volunteer role. In 2018, as part of Course 38 of the New Zealand Kellogg Rural Leadership Program, he published *Building Mental Wellness in the Rural Sector* (Kirk, 2018). Drawing on his own lived experience with anxiety and depression, the report advocates for openness about mental wellbeing in rural communities, the destigmatising of mental illness, and the principle that mental illness is an illness, not a weakness. It includes case studies from rural farmers, practical guidance, and signposting to services including Farmstrong and the Rural Support Trust. His Kellogg work and his Surfing for Farmers role share a common conviction: that rural communities are at their strongest when they talk openly about mental wellbeing and look after each other in everyday ways.

A key operating principle of Surfing for Farmers is the adage that fifteen beneficial surfs are better than thirty that do not have impact. Rather than trying to offer too

much, organisers prioritise sustained quality of experience and the wellbeing of the volunteer team. This discipline is one of the deliberate design choices that protects the program from the burnout pattern that defeats so many similar initiatives.

Impact

Latest figures showed 11,000 surf sessions were delivered annually across NZ.

Over 80% of participants reported reduced stress and anxiety

Reduced isolation, improved mental wellbeing, and lasting friendships between farmers documented in participant feedback

A growing community of trained volunteers

Why it works

Surfing for Farmers includes the program principles introduced in Section 3 in a practical way:

Trusted messengers (ethos): led by farmers and local volunteers

Language and framing as design (pathos): a surf, not a mental health exercise

Prevention and upstream: catches people before crisis

Wellbeing by stealth: arrives through a recreational activity and an easy chance to connect

Long horizon: sustained growth rather than rapid scale-up

Strengths-based: leads with joy and movement

Synergic satisfiers: meets multiple human needs at once (movement, social connection, time off the farm, sunlight, the rhythm of the ocean)

Adaptive delivery and multi-channel: the surf, the barbecue catch up afterwards, the WhatsApp group communication between sessions, and word-of-mouth invitation; each coastal town runs it slightly differently while the principles stay the same

Volunteer protection: deliberate design for volunteer sustainability

Transferability

The program’s principles-based design has allowed it to expand successfully, and its model could easily be replicated. Since 2018, Surfing for Farmers has been established at over 25 NZ coastal sites. It does not require a particular surf school or location, only commitment to the core principles. Within NZ rural wellbeing discussions, Surfing for Farmers is widely recognised as an example of effective community-led, preventive, peer-driven work.

SFF has also shown what collaboration in practice can look like. In July 2026, SFF joined forces with New Zealand's Rural Riders under a new For Farmers umbrella, led by general manager Dominic Huxley. Rural Riders is a mountain-biking wellbeing program founded by Hamish Clausen in Taupō in 2021 on the same principle SFF pioneered: an outdoor activity, run by volunteers, that gives farmers a low-barrier reason to get off the farm and connect.

The two organisations shared purpose, funding sources and, increasingly, volunteer bases. Rather than run alongside each other, they made the choice to collaborate and combine. Together they now reach 37 coastal and inland sites in New Zealand

throughout the whole calendar year, drawing on shared volunteer support, commercial partners and funding from the Rural Wellbeing Fund.

The merger is a program-level example of coordination not competition. It removes the duplication of boards, funding applications and administrative overhead, and frees both programs to focus their volunteer time on the work itself. It also demonstrates a principle that runs through much of this report: rural wellbeing initiatives are stronger when they combine what they do best (Uys, 2026).

Sources

Sources: Kirk (2018); Surfing for Farmers (n.d.); Thomson (pers. comm., 2025); Kirk (pers. comm., 2025); Uys (2026). Full details in References.

Case Study 3 – Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program (Canada)

Location	Manitoba, Canada
Established	~2022 (formalised)
Leadership	Gerry Friesen (Co-founder and Chief Administrative Officer); Roberta Galbraith (Vice-Chair and co-founder)
Focus	No cost, confidential one-on-one counselling delivered by counsellors with agricultural backgrounds
Website	manitobafarmerwellness.ca

Background

The Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program was launched in March 2022 as a grassroots not-for-profit by farmers who saw that counselling for farmers was hard to access, and even when accessible, was rarely delivered by people who understood farming life. It grew out of longer-standing work through the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line, and reflects a deliberate design decision: counselling delivered by people from the agricultural community itself.

How it works

The service offers no cost, confidential one-on-one counselling delivered by counsellors from agricultural backgrounds, by phone, video call or in-person. The founding leadership combines lived experience with agricultural depth.

Gerry Friesen, co-founder and Chief Administrative Officer, grew up on a poultry farm near Wawanesa, ran a hog operation until 2007, and was diagnosed with anxiety and depression in 2004. He began volunteering with the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line in 2007 and now writes and speaks as *The Recovering Farmer*.

Roberta Galbraith, Co-founder and Vice-Chair of the board, is a fourth-generation farmer from north of Minnedosa with a career in agricultural finance and community leadership. She is a connector who builds resources and relationships for the program.

Impact

As a grassroots service, it is named in national Canadian coverage (Manitoba Co-operator, Farmtario, Western Producer, Global News, CFA)

Gerry Friesen is featured as an ambassador voice on the Do More Ag homepage, supporting the wider Canadian farmer mental health movement and gaining further credibility

Friesen’s blog and 2024 book, The Recovering Farmer (Friesen Press), reach a wide audience across Canada

Why it works

Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program uses the following program principles:

Trusted messengers (ethos): The program was designed by farmers for farmers and therefore lends credibility with those using it. Counsellors are from the agricultural community and peer lived experience is the focus.

Language and framing as design (pathos): farmer-recognisable tone throughout

Based on credible evidence (logos): counsellors are qualified professionals combining clinical training with lived agricultural experience

Prevention and upstream: No cost and accessible at the point of need

Strengths-based: recovery framing rather than deficit

Transferability

Highly transferable. The core principle, that farmers reach out for help more readily when the helper looks and sounds like them, is not specific to Manitoba. Australia has elements of this in initiatives including ifarmwell's co-design and its *Weather it Together* and farmer video campaigns, but a formalised peer-counsellor pool as is used in the Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program could extend the impact. Combining lived experience with clinical training is a design principle worth exploring. It addresses the gap between boots on the ground and expertise that Sharon May identified in the UK.

Sources

Sources: Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program (n.d.); Friesen (2024); Friesen (pers. comm., 2025); Galbraith (pers. comm., 2025); and Canadian media coverage 2021–2024. Full details in References.

Case Study 4 – National Farmer Mental Health Alliance and Be Farm Well (Canada)

Location	Canada (nationally recognised training now delivered in Canada and the United States)
Leadership	Lauren Van Ewyk (CEO)
Focus	Farmer-designed mobile wellbeing app plus agriculture-informed therapist training
Website	nfmha.ca

Background

The National Farmer Mental Health Alliance was founded by Lauren Van Ewyk in response to something noticed through years of counselling farmers: farmers are fixers by nature. They typically arrive for one or two counselling sessions, learn the tools, and then execute them on their own. It identified the support that farmers can need without a formal appointment, and at the times they most need it.

How it works

The Alliance runs a two-pronged model.

The Be Farm Well app. Mobile-only, government-funded, free for six months. Users check in on sleep, mood and self-care. A low-mood pattern over five days triggers a prompt for a therapist to reach out. Features include goals, a reward system, voice record, resources (hospital, crisis line, emergency numbers), and a Barnyard Connect feature for farmer-to-farmer conversation and local events. Key design insight: two to four in the morning is often when farmers most need to check in, and it is when most services are not available.

Agriculture Informed Therapy™ training. Nationally recognised training program for psychotherapists, social workers and counsellors who work with rural clients. Online, accredited for continuing professional development, and now delivered in Canada and the United States. Introduces non-farming professionals to the demands, culture and treatment considerations of farm life, so that a farmer who does reach out for formal counselling meets a therapist who understands the world they come from. Partnered with Farm Safety Nova Scotia for subsidised training spots.

Impact

Semi-finalist in the Producer Mental Wellbeing Initiative funded by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Strong reported feedback on Be Farm Well app usability, relevance and efficacy

Agriculture Informed Therapy training now offered across Canada and the United States

Related resource: Three Oaks Cabin is a respite retreat for farmers, first responders and their families

Why it works

Trusted messengers (ethos): trains therapists to understand farmers

Language and framing as design (pathos): Be Farm Well and Barnyard Connect speak in rural language

Based on credible evidence (logos): Agriculture Informed Therapy is accredited for continuing professional development; the app is government-funded and clinically informed

Prevention and upstream: gives farmers tools before clinical intervention is needed

Long horizon: builds infrastructure that scales

Adaptive delivery and multi-channel: app and therapist training work as complementary layers

Transferability

Both components are highly transferable to Australia. An app in the context of Be Farm Well, with its after-hours availability and the fixer-mentality design insight, could add value to existing platforms in Australia. There is some implementation already, such as Steph Schmidt's recently launched check-in tool *How Full is Your Silo*, a three-minute check-in that leaves users with one small step to implement as a result. Upskilling psychologists with further understanding of agriculture has merit too, but would need to be carefully considered.

Sources

Sources: National Farmer Mental Health Alliance (n.d.); Van Ewyk (2026); Van Ewyk and Readel (n.d.). Full details in References.

Case Study 5 – Do More Agriculture Foundation (Canada)

Location	Canada (national)
Organisation type	Registered Canadian charitable foundation
Executive Director	Merle Massie
2026 Board Chair	Emma Cross
Focus	National culture change on mental wellbeing in agriculture
Contact	info@domore.ag; domore.ag

Background

The Do More Agriculture Foundation was started by farmers who felt Canadian agriculture was carrying a mental health load in silence. The founding line, *we need to Do More to shine a light on mental health in agriculture*, became both the name and the purpose. The organisation set out to shift the everyday culture of farming rather than to run a clinical service, and describes its own purpose as *together, we're cultivating a culture of mental wellbeing in agriculture*.

Executive Director Merle Massie brings a background in Saskatchewan farm life and rural research, and provided Do More Ag with a clear brief: keep the work locally led, keep the language honest, and keep the culture of farming at the centre.

In a conversation during my travels, co-founder Lesley Kelly shared some observations worth noting.

The founding team was deliberately mixed, combining two farmers and two ag-adjacent professionals so that vision, legal, funding and communications capabilities were all met. She also spoke about the goal of becoming obsolete: success is defined as the point when mental health is embedded in farm culture and business practice thoroughly enough that a dedicated charity is no longer needed. Externalising stress as a shared environmental pressure opens conversations that internalising mental illness tends to close and the most meaningful conversations usually happen after the formal Q&A, at tailgates and at kitchen tables. Effective programs need to plan and resource this follow-up as core work.

How it works

Do More Ag organises its work around three pillars.

Action. Raising awareness, fostering education and breaking stigma. This is the outward-facing pillar, the campaigning and communications work.

Community. Creating connection and belonging so support is easier to access. This is the pillar that says: a farmer will pick up the phone or download an app to access mental health support if they feel that they'll still belong.

Resources. Bridging the rural mental health gap by connecting those who seek support with those who provide it. This is the practical pillar, the tools, the maps, the pathways.

Underneath the pillars sit five program areas.

Workshops and training are delivered through two named programs, *Talk Ask Listen* (mental health literacy and communication skills for anyone in the farming

ecosystem) and *AgCulture* (which orients health and mental health providers, and others to the culture of farming so they can meet farmers where they are).

The Community Fund supports rural communities to start conversations and take local action. In the Saskatoon meeting Merle described the mechanism in more detail: local champions apply for funding, then choose from a menu of workshops, and are supported to mobilise their own networks to bring people into the room. The goal is to ignite community conversation, learning, and action, and Do More Ag resources them to do it well.

AgTalk, delivered via the Togetherall platform, is an anonymous, peer-supported online space for farmers to connect anytime, anywhere. In our meeting it was described to me as *a coffee row within a bigger town*, a familiar farming space developed inside a larger online community.

Resources and toolkits include a self check-in questionnaire designed to spark dialogue and guide action, alongside downloadable materials. Two named delivery channels sit under these program areas. *Hay Are You OK?* is a self check-in tool developed in partnership with Bayer, letting farmers reflect on their mental health, identify early signs of stress, and connect with trusted supports. *Hay Are We Okay?* is a podcast launched in partnership with the AGCO Foundation, showcasing community-led mental health initiatives in farming and rural communities; since its October 2025 soft launch it has been downloaded more than 350 times, with episodes ranging from theatre and film production to the power of informal gathering spaces. Together, the tool and the podcast illustrate the way Do More Ag runs the same conversation through multiple channels, from a private self-assessment to a public storytelling platform.

Partnerships and campaigns run across sectors and with media, to raise awareness and reduce stigma at the national level.

Do More Ag is largely industry-funded and consciously limits its reliance on federal government funding, so that changes of political cycle do not disrupt the work.

Impact

The most visible impact of Do More Ag is a national conversation that did not exist a decade ago. The organisation has helped normalise the phrase farmer mental health in Canadian agriculture, seeded funded community-led activity in provinces across the country through the Community Fund, and made an anonymous online farmer-only peer space available around the clock through AgTalk.

Do More Ag has also reshaped the language of the field. It rejects the word *stigma* as too flat, preferring *bias, stereotypes and discrimination*, because those words name observable, changeable behaviour. That distinction has moved from Do More Ag communications into the wider Canadian ag mental health conversation.

Why it works

Do More Ag is an example of several of the principles that recur through this report.

It resources local champions (principle 1, trusted messengers; principle 9, adaptive delivery and multi-channel, place-based). The Community Fund invites community champions to instigate workshops, keeping them individually relevant.

It treats farming as a distinct culture that needs culturally informed care, akin to Indigenous or newcomer communities. Farmers detect quickly whether a provider gets it, and Do More Ag builds the AgCulture workshop for that reason.

It engages the whole agricultural ecosystem, not only producers. Agronomists, lenders, accountants and input suppliers are all in the room, because they are the people farmers are already talking to.

It matches the channel to the moment (principle 9, adaptive delivery and multi-channel). A community BBQ, a workshop, an anonymous online post at midnight, a private self check-in on the Hay Are You OK? tool, and a story-driven podcast are all valid openings to the same conversation.

It uses language and framing as design (principle 2, pathos). The stigma to bias, stereotypes, discrimination shift is a deliberate, considered piece of communication engineering.

Transferability to Australia

Australia has very strong national organisations working on farmer wellbeing, and the Do More Ag model offers a distinctive combination also worth considering.

Sources

Sources: Do More Agriculture Foundation (2025); Kelly (pers. comm., 2025); Massie (pers. comm., 2025). Full details in References.



Figure 20. Left: The author with Merle Massie, The Do More Ag Foundation, Canada. Right: the author with Lesley Kelly, The Do More Ag Foundation, Canada. (Source: author)

Case Study 6 – ifarmwell (Australia)

Location	Australia (national), based at Adelaide University
Established	2018
Leadership	A/Prof Kate Gunn (Founder and Director)
Backing	Various philanthropic, industry, government and academic partners (e.g. Future Drought Fund, James and Diana Ramsay Foundation, South Australian Government's Drought Response Support Package)
Focus	Free, evidence-based co-designed programs and resources to help Australian farmers cope with life's challenges
Website	ifarmwell.com.au

Background

ifarmwell was founded in 2018 by Associate Professor Kate Gunn, a clinical psychologist who grew up on a South Australian farm near Streaky Bay. It is based at Adelaide University's Department of Rural Health. Its purpose is to help Australian farmers cope effectively with life's challenges and get the most out of every day, regardless of the circumstances they face.

It began as an interactive online program, with text message follow up, that is free and open to any farmer or rural person who wants to use it.

In recent years, ifarmwell has expanded well beyond the original website and modules into a broader suite of channels: podcasts, social media, interactive workshops, conversation cards, published research, and a farmer-wellbeing musical, *Kick Off Ya Boots!* The message stays consistent across all of them; the channels vary so a farmer can find the entry point that fits, and it is a proven model that really reaches farmers.

How it works

The original ifarmwell online modules were co-designed with farmers and informed by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT equips people with transferable coping strategies for circumstances beyond their control, which fits the farming context well: weather, prices, policy and family dynamics all sit largely outside a farmer's control, but the internal response to them is not. The core is an interactive online toolkit backed by short text-message prompts. Farmers work through the tools at their own pace, with content designed around a farmer-recognisable voice and rural context rather than a clinical one.

Weather it Together

The Weather it Together campaign is a recent extension of ifarmwell's work, funded by the South Australian Government's Drought Response Support Package, delivered in partnership with key industry groups, in response to the drought conditions which impacted wellbeing in many areas of South Australia, until recently. The campaign encourages farmers to look after their wellbeing by staying connected, focusing on what they can control, keeping active, and speaking up when they need support. These four key strategies are based upon research evidence, and each campaign strategy is informed by behaviour change theory. Its delivery has been

coordinated by Annabelle Homer, who lives on the land and has a strong background in agriculture including her former role as a rural reporter on the ABC's Country Hour and is married to a farmer in South Australia. Messages were delivered via print, online/social, TV and radio-based media channels. In 2026, as part of the 'ask for help' pillar of the campaign, a five-part video series was released via social media, featuring farmers who have experienced depression, grief, relationship breakdown, isolation and the cumulative pressures of farming life, sought professional mental health help and found it useful, alongside practical advice from rural GP Dr Justin Gladman. The videos are hosted at weatherittogether.org.au and are part of a growing library of lived-experience stories designed to support farmer wellbeing and suicide prevention. These have been well received and part of the success is the relatable farmer to farmer approach.

Impact

Research associates use of the ifarmwell online modules with reduced psychological distress and improved mental wellbeing among Australian farmers (Gunn et al., 2022)

Ongoing collaboration with Adelaide University and industry partners extends research and delivery

Weather it Together video series was distributed nationally, with contributions from farmers across South Australia including Peterborough, Coonalpyn, Kulpara and the state's far north

Kate Gunn recognised through a Churchill Fellowship (2017) and the ongoing Founder and Director role, the national Farmer of the Year Award for Excellence in Agricultural Research (2022), the National LiFE Award for Innovation from Suicide Prevention Australia (2022) and the Shaping Australia Community Champion Award from Universities Australia (2023).

Kick Off Ya Boots! is a musical theatre production written by Mallee farmer John Gladigau (who is also Creative Director and Farmer Advocate in the ifarmwell team at Adelaide University), with clinical and messaging input from Kate Gunn. This Little Town Production has drawn strong regional audiences in its live performances over many years, and through its 2024/25 South Australian film tour (with multiple sell-out shows) in partnership with funders such as Ski for Life and the SA Drought Hub.

Farmer storytelling project: More than 80 Australian farmers featured over a 12-month campaign, sharing what gives them hope, what they are proud of, and what helps them manage stress. Reflects the research finding that farmer pride in the industry improves self-efficacy and in turn their wellbeing. Inspired by the work of Farmstrong in New Zealand.

Why it works

ifarmwell illustrates several of the eleven principles.

Trusted messengers (ethos): founded with a strong understanding of farming, includes farmer-led storytelling and rural GPs and their Weather it Together coordinator also has strong agricultural understanding

Language and framing as design (pathos): farmer-recognisable voice throughout, deliberately non-clinical

Based on credible evidence (logos): founder is an Associate Professor; work is informed by evidence-based behaviour change and psychological approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and evaluated in peer-reviewed research; co-designed with farmers from the outset

Prevention and upstream: focus on everyday coping, not crisis

Wellbeing by stealth: reaches farmers through trusted faces on video, humour, music and text messages, not through 'mental health first aid' framing

Strengths-based: framed around capability and helping farmers "get the most out of every day"

Adaptive delivery and multi-channel: website, texts, podcasts, videos, workshops, conversation cards and stage performance; adapted for regional audiences across South Australia

Coordination and collaboration: partnerships with multiple universities and industry bodies

Transferability

Many aspects of the ifarmwell program and ethos are transferable to any rural sector, across Australia or internationally. Its central principle, that farmer wellbeing content should be both evidence based and co-designed with farmers (and delivered in a voice they recognise), applies to all rural populations and especially to those that cannot relate to generic mental health messaging. Making it farmer specific is key. The Weather it Together campaign model, in particular, offers a template for other regional governments and philanthropic funders looking to extend the reach of an evidence-based online program without duplicating it.

Sources

Sources: ifarmwell (n.d.); Weather it Together (2026); Gunn et al. (2022); Adelaide University (2026); University of South Australia (2025). Full details in References.

Case Study 7 – Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (Canada)

Location	**Canada (national scope, bilingual delivery)**
Established	November 2022
Leadership	Dr Briana Hagen (CEO and lead scientist)
Focus	National clinical hub for farmer mental health and wellbeing; evidence-based, farm-tailored infrastructure
Website	ccaw.ca

Background

The Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (CCAW) is Canada's national clinical hub for farmer mental health and wellbeing, established in November 2022 in response to a federal call for coordinated, evidence-based, farm-tailored infrastructure at national scale. It was created to address the fragmentation Canada was experiencing across a proliferation of well-meaning but often non-clinical or non-evidence-based programs. Its founding brief was clear: build a national body that meets both the clinical rigour required for safe practice and the cultural specificity required for farmers to trust and use it.

Leadership

CCAW is led by CEO and lead scientist Dr Briana Hagen, who completed her PhD in Population Medicine at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, examining how farmers and their farms are impacted by mental health outcomes, with a focus on perceived stress and the barriers and facilitators of help-seeking. Under her leadership, CCAW has resisted the pressure to soften psychometric integrity for the sake of more "farmy" language, instead piloting additional questions alongside validated scales for depression, anxiety and burnout.

How it works

CCAW's model operates across three interconnected areas:

The **National Farmer Wellness Network crisis line** (1-866-FARMS01), free to access and staffed by more than 250 farm-trained counsellors.

The **"In the Know" training**: a four-hour mental health literacy course being embedded into agricultural college curricula, so future farmers and practitioners enter the sector with baseline literacy already in place.

Adjacent professional training: agronomists, milk truck drivers, advisors and loan officers are trained to notice red flags and respond confidently, recognising that these are often the people who ride in the ute with a farmer and see distress before family or a GP does.

CCAW combines national survey data with qualitative interviews. Its early qualitative work analysed farmer-specific vocabulary around distress: for some farmers, "stress" meant everyday pressure; for others, it mapped onto suicidal ideation. The program design and counsellor training now deliberately build this language in. CCAW has also partnered with TELUS Health as its provider for mental health services.

Impact

National crisis line free to access, staffed by 250+ farm-trained counsellors

"In the Know" mental health literacy course being embedded into agricultural college curricula

Bidirectional literacy model: mental health literacy for farmers alongside agricultural literacy for practitioners

Ethical "stamp of approval" for co-promoted organisations, protecting brand integrity across a fragmented Canadian landscape

Why it works

CCAW has examples of the eleven principles:

Trusted messengers (ethos): farmer-recognisable delivery through peer podcasts and supporting professionals

Language and framing as design (pathos): farmer vocabulary analysis throughout the program design

Based on credible evidence (logos): Programs are evidence-informed and use research and evaluation to ensure effectiveness

Long-horizon funding: multi-year federal funding avoids boom-and-bust cycles

Coordination and collaboration: organises provincial groups to map gaps and co-design roles. Worked with the University of Guelph to launch national survey on farmer and rancher mental health. Brings together advocates, decision makers and front-line providers

Ethics and safety: "stamp of approval" protects farmers and brand integrity

Transferability to Australia

CCAW, as a national clinical hub model is directly relevant to Australia's current situation. The Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australian Agriculture is taking steps in this direction. Hagen's central insight is that meaningful change takes longer than most funders appreciate, and that boom-and-bust funding cycles can undo years of trust-building in a single cycle. Australia should emphasise a national body with clear responsibility for clinical standards, program design support, training and data.

Sources: Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing (n.d.); Hagen (pers. comm., 2025). Full details in References.

Case Study 8 – Tim Morden (Canada)

Location Manitoba, Canada

Interview Personal interview during Nuffield travel, 2025

Background

Tim Morden is a Canadian farmer running an operation of approximately 12,700 acres. Like many farmers, he works long hours, is constantly making decisions within the business, and faces the same difficulty attracting staff that many farmers I met were navigating. He is also generously open about his own recovery from depression and alcoholism, which he credits substantially to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

My conversation with Tim was a memorable one, and one of many along the way that helped shape the themes running through this report: the value of peer support, the importance of being seen, the role of purpose bigger than the farm, and the everyday practices that keep a farmer well.

A personal recovery journey

Tim credits much of his own recovery to AA. He finds the 12-step program a durable structure of connection, honesty and mutual support, and describes its guiding principle as being part of something bigger than yourself. His view is that "everyone can benefit from some sort of group therapy", no matter what someone is going through. He also notes that the power comes from the participant's own choice to be involved; it cannot be forced. In fact, it took years of him gently suggesting the concept to a peer before they finally decided to join.

Insights he shared

Several observations from Tim's interview surface elsewhere in this report, and provided much opportunity for thought throughout my travels. In brief, these are some takeaways:

On exercise: "If exercise was a drug, it would be the most prescribed drug in the world." He names diet as difficult but not impossible as a farmer.

On finding something for the whole mind: an activity that uses your whole brain gives a farmer a needed break from the running commentary of the business. Tim's example: scuba diving.

On belonging: "Being accepted is the most important thing."

On purpose: a reflective question worth carrying: "How do you want to be remembered?"

On storytelling: sharing stories creates the environment where others feel they can speak.

On serenity: "Serenity is where happiness is." And it is different for everyone; his example is stopping to look at a sunset.

On call lines: in Tim's view, national crisis and support lines are not utilised well enough; the barrier is lack of trust and understanding, not lack of information.

On recovery generally: the ability to recognise you have a problem and to know yourself, alongside being loved and understanding your inner child, are all part of the work.

Conversations such as Tim's helped shape many of the themes I established throughout the report. His story anchored several important insights: the underused power of peer support and group settings, the language and framing challenge that keeps farmers from reaching out, the role of purpose bigger than the individual, and the everyday practices (exercise, hobbies that use the whole mind, gratitude, sharing stories) that build a farmer's wellbeing account over time. Tim's honesty and openness are exactly what more farmers need to hear from more farmers.



Figure 21: The author with Tim Morden, Manitoba, Canada 2025. (Source: author)

Sources: Morden (pers. comm., 2025). Full details in References.

Case Study 9 – The Pinnaroo Project (Australia)

Location	Pinnaroo, South Australian Mallee
Delivered	2021 to 2023 (three years)
Partners	Pinnaroo community, Mallee Arts Group, Flinders University's Caring Futures Institute
Lead	Professor Robyn Clark
Focus	Community arts-in-health program

Background

From 2021 to 2023, the Mallee town of Pinnaroo in South Australia ran a three-year community arts-in-health program. It was delivered in partnership between the Pinnaroo community, the Mallee Arts Group and Flinders University's Caring Futures Institute, led by Professor Robyn Clark.

How it reflects the framework for strong communities (Figure 12)

Structural supports: university research and philanthropic funding.

Community conditions: the local arts network and the leadership driving it.

Social mechanisms: trust built through repeated, low-pressure interactions.

The thriving farmer core: participants found purpose in a reason to turn up or a new skill, belonging in a place surrounded by other locals, and connection through new and strengthened relationships.

Impact

564 health screenings delivered over three years

Participant satisfaction around ninety per cent

Measurable improvements in wellbeing, such as fewer depressive symptoms, lower smoking rates and healthier eating

An independent evaluation estimated a return of $2.30 in social and health value for every $1 invested

Transferability

The project has since been written up as a scalable model that other small communities can adapt.

Sources

Clark et al. (2024). Full details in References.

Case Study 10 – Merger of Fat Farmers and Active Farmers (Australia)

Location	**Australia - National**
Established	Active Farmers founded in 2015, Mangoplah, NSW, by Ginny Stevens. Fat Farmers was founded in 2010 at Maitland, South Australia by three local farmers, Ben Wundersitz, Greg Hean and Scott Hoyle.
Integrated Leadership	Late 2025 to early 2026 Richard Sheppy (CEO)
Focus	Group fitness as the vehicle for connection and mental wellbeing. To grow connected communities.
Website	fatfarmers.com.au

Background

Active Farmers was founded by Ginny Stevens in Mangoplah, NSW, in 2015 and runs group fitness in community halls, sheds and footy ovals, with a philosophy close to Fat Farmers': fitness as the vehicle for connection and mental wellbeing. The two organisations integrated during late 2025 to early 2026, and together now reach around 95 rural communities, and growing.

Fat Farmers CEO Richard Sheppy summed up the rationale: "together we can build on each other's strengths to reach even more people and continue fostering health, connection and resilience in farming and rural communities across Australia" (Anderson, 2025).

Why it matters

Like the SFF and Rural Riders merger in New Zealand (Case Study 2), it shows coordination rather than competition: eliminating duplication of boards, funding requests and administrative overhead, and allowing the organisations to work together for greater impact.

Sources

Anderson (2025). Full details in References.