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The Australian Rangeland Society

The Accidental Counsellor: more to beef extension officers than technical advice

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Abstract. Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) beef extension officers are recognised for their technical knowledge and skills but less acknowledged is the integral support role they play as a confidante, especially in times of crisis. During drought not only is the technical advice provided by beef extension officers essential, but so are good listening skills, compassion, empathy and the ability to recognise signs of deteriorating mental health. DAF beef extension officers were interviewed to capture their personal experiences working with graziers during the current drought to implement management practices, many of which are prerequisite to meet the requirements of government funding. The findings demonstrate the important role beef extension officers play as a link to technical and mental health resources to alleviate the stress of living on a drought-stricken property. The information gathered has been compared with research that has been undertaken on the topic more generally. Recommendations are made to assist extension officers to effectively do their job and be an integral part of the mental health support community.

Keywords: drought, beef extension officers, strategies, coping, technical skills, support

Introduction

Since August 2014 the majority of Queensland has been drought-declared (Drought declarations (Department of Agriculture and Fisheries), 2017). These areas are serviced by Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) beef extension officers who provide technical knowledge, skills and training in regards to beef production to graziers. Six DAF beef extension officers were interviewed to develop an understanding of the impact the current drought has had on their ability to undertake their role and the effect on their personal well-being. The extension officers interviewed had a varied level of experience with drought, ranging from limited personal experience to growing up on drought-affected properties. Professionally the level of experience ranged from five to thirty years in the role. This notably had an effect on how extension officers perceived their role and how they conducted themselves with graziers. The interview questions considered the type of technical advice provided, the role extension officers play as a first point of call for graziers, how they can provide links to mental health services, and whether they accessed any related training, such as Mental Health First Aid.

The role of extension officers

There is recent documented evidence of a link between prolonged drought and deteriorating mental health (Edwards, Gray, & Hunter, 2014) (O'Brien, Berry, Coleman, & Hanigan, 2014). Services that have a close contact with graziers such as DAF extension staff are often in a position of trust in local communities and have on-farm contact with graziers in times of considerable stress (Sartore, et al., 2008). As such they are often the first point of contact and well placed to link graziers with services for mental health advice and support (Sartore, et al., 2008).

The majority of extension officers interviewed reported that they found themselves privy to personal accounts or observed signs of emotional stress in relation to drought. Extension officers reported that many of the graziers' concerns such as financial pressures, workload and succession issues were ongoing but were compounded and become overwhelming during drought. These observations are supported by studies that have found that drought becomes a key stressor and adds to financial pressure and uncertainty about the future especially in regards to conflict with transition of farm ownership (Fennell, Jarrett, Kettler, Dollman, & Turnbull, 2016) (Stain, et al., 2011). Extension officers stated graziers shared with them situations such as letters from banks threatening foreclosure if payments are not made, boarding schools demanding fees be paid or children will have to leave, intergenerational conflict, financial impacts from the 2011 live export ban, and stock management issues such as running out of water or reluctance to sell stock.

A sense of purpose, meaning and hope are considered important attributes of resilience, predicting better mental health outcomes following major adversity (Stain, et al., 2011). On several occasions extension officers would direct the grazier's focus to something positive, such as children's school achievements. Another approach was to work with them on an achievable action such as applying for

government assistance or reducing stock numbers. The extension officers with the most personal and professional experience of drought intuitively took both of these approaches. One extension officer described a situation where they worked with the grazier using paddock maps and a visual assessment of the paddock to calculate how many cattle to sell. This resulted in a significant number of cattle being sold and an improvement in both cattle and land condition. The extension officer later received feedback from the grazier that they had been “doing it pretty tough” and that the assistance received had helped.

An extension officer interviewed suggested that well-meaning volunteers visiting areas and ‘popping’ in to visit graziers, added pressure as they weren’t known to the graziers. Conversely, however, many DAF extension officers were welcomed onto the property and confided in because they were a trusted and respected person well known to the grazier.

Referral options

There were mixed responses from the extension officers interviewed regarding referral options for people needing mental health support. There were generally limited options locally for the first 12-18 months of the drought in some areas. Studies have found that a possible paradox in identifying the need for referral is the possibility that there will be a lack of mental health services in the area (Hossain, Eley, Coutts, & Gorman, 2008). Then in some other cases there were too many options. In one study farmers spoke of being referred from one person to the next and wishing they could just speak to the same person consistently (Hossain, Eley, Coutts, & Gorman, 2008). Some of the extension officers interviewed did not know who to refer people to and also found it difficult to suggest to someone they should talk to a professional. In areas where specialist mental health professionals are unavailable there is a need for non-health agencies such as DAF to have the capacity to be able to link individuals to mental health services (Sartore, Hoolahan, Tonna, Kelly, & Stain, 2005).

Most referral options were telephone-related and not available as on-property visits. Many graziers do not want to visit a public office in town. As mental health practitioners may not be able to travel onto properties, due to funding or policy constraints, there was a need for graziers to self-refer, which is problematic. In one region the strategy discussed by a team of DAF extension officers was to get someone to make a phone call to, for example, Lifeline while the extension officer was with them.

Impact on extension officers personally

Most of the extension officers interviewed generally felt helpless and even guilty as they could not offer advice to change the situation or relieve the financial pressure and then at the end of the day they went home knowing they had a reliable income and less stress to contend with. Extension officers living in drought affected areas reported being brought down emotionally by the atmosphere and their sense of helplessness. Generally the extension officers found it harder dealing with people who were affected by drought as they felt like they were wasting graziers’ time. One extension officer stated that they personally felt conflicted as targets and a funding focus was not always the most appropriate thing for the situation. For example, an extension officer would contact a grazier about undertaking a Grazing BMP self-assessment but instead have a discussion regarding receivership, people losing properties, cattle prices, or the grazier explaining they don’t have time because there is water to cart and pipelines to install.

Training Options

Hossain et al (2008) found field officers who are often the first point of contact have few skills or resources to identify or support farmers who are depressed or at risk of self-harm. He found that Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training improved understanding of mental health issues and recognition of symptoms, and provided skills to appropriately refer a person for professional help (Hossain, Eley, Coutts, & Gorman, 2008).

Overall the extension officers interviewed were not aware of training available in regards to mental health. Or they either did not have time to attend or felt it was a low priority compared to other knowledge they needed for their role. Others attended ‘Accidental Counsellor Training’ organised by Uniting Care. This training provided basic skills to support someone in an emotional crisis by learning how to recognise, respond and refer to an appropriate service. One extension officer who attended this training said that it validated their current response as the best possible and improved their confidence in what they were doing.

Conclusion

This small qualitative survey supported the findings of recent studies that service providers including DAF extension officers are often the first point of call for graziers and that they can provide a link to

mental health services. Overall there was limited knowledge and confidence in regards to providing graziers with mental health support and referring them to appropriate channels, although this was influenced by the extension officers' level of experience of drought. As drought can be difficult to predict in timing or duration but is a common occurrence in Australia it would be beneficial for all extension officers to attend mental health training such as, but not limited to, MHFA, which is available to extension officers through the Department, or Accidental Counsellor Workshops.

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