



FARM MANAGEMENT CANADA
GESTION AGRICOLE DU CANADA

Healthy Minds Healthy Farms

Exploring a Connection
between Mental Health and
Farm Business Management

Executive Summary

Overview

Agriculture contributes \$111.9 billion per year to the Canadian economy, and accounts for 6.7% of Canada's gross domestic product.ⁱ In 2016, the agriculture and agri-food industry employed 2.3 million, or one in eight Canadians.ⁱⁱ Canada has set a lofty goal of increasing agri-food exports to \$85 billion by 2025 (an increase from \$64.6 billion in 2017).ⁱⁱⁱ

It is clear that agriculture is vital for the Canadian economy. The well-being of farmers is key to a healthy agricultural sector. Yet, recent research indicates that 45% of farmers have high stress levels.^{iv}

The conversation around improving the mental health of all Canadians has been elevated in recent years. In 2019, the Canadian Mental Health Association released its report *Going it alone: The Mental Health and well-being of Canada's Entrepreneurs*.^v In the same year, the House of Commons of Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food released their report to Senate, *Mental Health: A Priority for our Farmers*, which provided recommendations for Federal government to prioritize actions that can improve the mental health of our country's farmers. Efforts to support positive mental health in Canada must include our farmers.

In recognition of the contribution of farmers to the Canadian economy, support for farm businesses continues to be delivered across the country through federal, provincial and territorial governments; not-for-profit organizations; and community groups.

The mental health of Canada's farmers as it relates to farm business management is of critical economic, and public health importance. This study aims to improve our understanding of the relationship between mental health and farm business management. More specifically, how we can support mental health through farm business management, and how supporting farm business management can contribute to positive mental health.

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Objective

This study sought to improve our understanding of the relationship between farm business management practices and farmer mental health by studying:

- Business and lifestyle factors that influence farmer mental health.
- How farm business management practices can positively or negatively impact farmer mental health.
- How mental health can enable or restrict strong farm business management.

Research Methods

To achieve our objectives, the research team:

- Conducted a literature review, citing over 150 grey and academic sources.
- Conducted a nationwide survey of 1,735 Canadian farmers.¹
- Led 14 focus groups with 113 participants in total.
- Conducted 72 on-on-one interviews with farmers and industry representatives.



¹ With gratitude to Farm Credit Canada for co-ordinating survey distribution through the (FCC) Vision Panel. The survey was a collaborative partnership between the research team, Farm Management Canada, and Farm Credit Canada.

Key Findings

Stress and the Canadian farming population:

- 62% of Canadian farmers are categorized with mid-stress scores and 14% with high stress.
- Three out of four Canadian farmers indicate being moderately to highly stressed about unpredictable interference, workload pressures and lack of time, and financial pressures.
- Women are more likely to report high stress.
- Younger farmers show signs of higher stress and are generally less effective at coping with stress.
- Growing operations are more likely to be stressed about finances compared to mature operations.

Connections between mental health and farm business management:

- 21% of farmers indicate they regularly follow a written business plan, and 48% indicate they never or rarely do.
- Farmer optimism contributes to farmers adopting more effective coping mechanisms and beneficial business management practices.
- Regularly following a written farm business plan contributes to peace of mind, more effective coping mechanisms, and adopting other beneficial business management practices.
- Business management practices are less frequent amongst younger farmers.
- Business management practices can improve on-farm relationships.
- Business management planning does not eliminate stress entirely.

Effectiveness of support programs for Canadian farmers:

- There are many examples of effective models for farmer mental health support in Canada.
- Farmers are more likely to participate in support programs offered by providers familiar with agriculture and that cater to the unique needs of farmers.
- Lack of access to mental health support in rural Canada remains a critical gap in supporting public health.

There are three guiding principles for supporting and bridging mental health and business management:

A RISK MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Risk management is language that resonates with farmers in the context of business planning as well as the peace of mind that can support positive mental health.

A TEAM APPROACH

Building support teams involving advisors, family and peers can alleviate the pressures of decision-making.

A PREPAREDNESS APPROACH

Planning ahead does not mean predicting the future – it means preparing for whatever might happen in the future. This is a key shift in current perceptions of farm business planning.

Recommendations

Our research has led to four (4) recommendations for supporting farmer mental health and farm business management to ensure agriculture remains a vital contributor to Canada's economy and public health.

Recommendation 1: Continue raising awareness around the importance of farmer mental health.

Actions:

- 1 Communicate the impacts of mental health on those working in agriculture.
- 2 Promote and support campaigns aimed at raising awareness about farmer mental health and reducing stigma.
- 3 Develop industry-wide strategies to address online harassment by the general public targeted at farmers and agricultural workers. There is a need to educate the public on realities of Canadian agriculture.
- 4 Explore opportunities to enhance rural public health capacity as it relates to mental health.
- 5 Continue to advocate for accelerated high-speed internet infrastructure in rural Canada. This infrastructure is a necessity for both business management technologies and online mental health service delivery.
- 6 Communicate the connection between mental health and farm business management including the impact of mental health on managing the farm and farm business management practices that support mental health.

Recommendation 2: Support the improvement of mental health literacy for farmers and those supporting farmers.

Actions:

- 7** Deliver mental health information sessions and training at industry events and through online learning channels.
- 8** Explore new communication and learning channels to promote mental health literacy such as forums where farmers feel safe to share their stories.
- 9** Develop and provide a list of existing mental health resources for farmers to be provided during industry learning events. This can also be shared through print materials, agricultural media, and other farm organization communication channels.
- 10** Advocate for mental health literacy training in college and university programs to promote long-term mental health.
- 11** Advocate for agricultural advisors and others who have regular contact with farmers (e.g., family, peers, etc.) to take mental health literacy training. The industry as a whole would benefit from greater sensitivity and skills to recognize and support those struggling with mental health issues.
- 12** Support mental health literacy training among farmers through expansion of programs such as the In the Know program.
- 13** Explore means of securing funding to further support and subsidize mental health literacy programs for farmers and those supporting farmers.

Recommendation 3: Deliver business management advice, tools and training that focuses on risk management and preparedness as a means of facing uncertainty.

Actions:

- 14** Develop and use language around risk management, scenario and contingency planning, or preparedness when giving advice about long-term business planning. Convey the message to farmers that business planning is not meant to be static or rigid and that it can help to be prepared or get ready for the future
- 15** Continue to provide training workshops to educate farmers about ways to effectively incorporate business management on the farm. Resources for farmers could include easy-to-use templates for common activities, scenario planning tools, and business plan templates that include risk and contingency elements. Incorporating some formality into a farm business, such as business planning and business meetings, can help make it more manageable. How to build an effective decision support team is another strategy that can be promoted (e.g., who to include and how they can help).
- 16** Increase accessibility and availability of risk management and scenario planning tools that can help farmers prepare for the uncertainty they will face in the future. For example, the Farm Management Canada Roots to Success training program. Roots to Success is a training program that uses the various risk areas and addresses them throughout a workshop type setting in which farmers and advisors go through each risk area and address their own farm comprehensive.
- 17** Conduct medium to long term research on the effects of farm business management on farmer mental health. The goal of this research should be to find effective ways to deliver farm business management as a means to cope with farm-related stressors.
- 18** Explore ways to incorporate mental health into emergency management planning.
- 19** Make business skills workshops more accessible in rural and remote areas. Considerations may include grants/bursaries or investments in technologies for rural-based farm organizations.

Recommendation 4: Advocate for farmer-specific mental health support services.

Actions:

- 20** Promote successful programs to farmers who are eligible for them in each province.
- 21** Advocate for the expansion of successful mental health support programs such as P.E.I.'s Farmer Assistance Program, Quebec's Sentinel Program and farm stress and crisis lines in provinces where they do not exist. Consider national programming to effectively and equitably service all provinces and territories. Promote the importance of including program staff with experience and knowledge of agriculture and the realities of farming.
- 22** Explore opportunities to target demographic groups including youth and women with mental health support services that meet their unique needs.
- 23** Establish a means for collaboration between industry organizations and governments to establish a community of practice or national centre to share knowledge for rural mental health resources.
- 24** Explore opportunities for research on the potential to revitalize extension services across Canada as a means of providing accessible and affordable support for farm business management.

i Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. An overview of the Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food System 2017. <http://www.agr.gc.ca/eng/canadian-agri-food-sector/an-overview-of-the-canadian-agriculture-and-agri-food-system-2017/?id=1510326669269>

ii Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. An overview of the Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food System 2017. <http://www.agr.gc.ca/eng/canadian-agri-food-sector/an-overview-of-the-canadian-agriculture-and-agri-food-system-2017/?id=1510326669269>

iii Government of Canada. (2018). Report of Canada's Economic Strategy Tables: Agri-food. <https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/098.nsf/eng/00022.html>

iv Jones-Bitton, A., Best, C., MacTavish, J., Fleming, S., & Hoy, S. (2019). Stress, anxiety, depression, and resilience in Canadian farmers. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01738-2>

v Canadian Mental Health Association. 2019. Going it Alone: The mental health and well-being of Canada's entrepreneurs. Retrieved from: <https://cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/GoingitAlone-CMHA-BDCReport-FINAL-EN.pdf>