

# **RURAL MENTAL HEALTH**

**A Policy Discussion Paper**

**Submitted to**

**Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food**



CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CANADA

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**October 31, 2017**

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## CONTEXT OF THE APPROACH

The MP for La Prairie wishes to raise the problem of psychological stress in Canada's agricultural and rural communities with the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Farmers in this country contribute to the vitality of rural communities. Improving their psychological health also helps improve the general health of rural communities in Canada.

## SENATE COMMITTEE

In June 1993, the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry tabled an interim report entitled *Farm Stress: Its Economic Dimension, Its Human Consequences*.

The Committee sees the concept of human sustainability in agriculture as significant. People are the cornerstone of any sustainable development in agriculture and the health of these people must be preserved. The present levels of stress reported by farm communities is unacceptable. The recognition that stress creates ill-health and contributes to injury, accidental death and illness makes it a serious concern of national significance.

It also states that, to reduce farm stress, numerous sectors of Canadian society must be involved.

Farmers and their families can take the lead in acknowledging and articulating its effects. Educators, researchers, service providers and legislators can direct public policy to areas of particular concern and to ways the stress can be alleviated. **The health of our farms and the health of our farmers are bound together, and both are sustainable.**

After more than 20 years, are the concerns expressed by the Senate Committee still relevant?

## SOME FACTS

Over time, studies and actions across the country have helped recognize and attempt to eliminate stress-related problems faced by farmers.

### **ENQUÊTE SUR LA SANTE PSYCHOLOGIQUE DES PRODUCTEURS AGRICOLES DU QUÉBEC**

The purpose of this study was to assess the psychological health of Quebec's farmers who belong to La Coop fédérée. A questionnaire was first administered to 1,338 dairy, hog and poultry farmers in December 2005 and January 2006. Focus groups were then held with 20 large crop farmers in the spring of 2006.

#### Highlights

- *Our agricultural population is not in good psychological health.*
- *50.9% of respondents have a high level of psychological distress.*
- *There are proportionally more women in the high-distress category (59.2% of women, compared to 49.5% of men).*
- *73.5% of farmers are regularly stressed, from half the time to almost always.*
- *People aged 35 to 54 are the most affected.*

List of problems causing stress among farmers:

- *Reduced income*
- *Increased expenses*
- *Environmental requirements*
- *Market instability*
- *Paperwork*
- *Animal diseases*
- *Workload*
- *Cost and uncertainty of quotas*
- *Global competition*
- *Unpredictable weather*

- *Debt*
- *Performance obligation*

5.7% of farmers have seriously considered suicide over the last twelve months, compared to 3.9% in the Quebec population.

This study paints a worrisome portrait of the psychological health of farmers.

Distress needs to be recognized and heard and initiatives must be encouraged to help reduce it by targeting risk factors that threaten psychological health.

An attempt must be made to minimize the impact of stressors:

- *By working to break isolation*
- *By educating the farming community of the importance of opening up and listening*
- *By promoting mutual support*

## **NATIONAL STRESS AND MENTAL SURVEY OF CANADIAN FARMERS REPORT TO THE CANADIAN AGRICULTURAL SAFETY ASSOCIATION**

Western Opinion Research Inc. conducted a survey in 2005 of 1,100 farmers across Canada. That survey was conducted using Statistics Canada data on the distribution of farms.

Almost two-thirds of Canadian farmers are feeling stressed on their farms. One in five farmers describe themselves as being “very stressed” while nearly half describe themselves as being “somewhat stressed”.

Financial concerns related to commodity prices, the BSE crisis, and general farm finances are mentioned by farmers as being the single biggest top-of-mind factors causing stress. This is relatively consistent across regions within Canada and across farm size.

Almost 2 in 10 farmers across Canada have spoken with a health care professional about stress and mental health.

Just less than one half of farmers are aware of resources they can turn to for help in managing stress and mental health. Four in 10 farmers say they can effectively manage stress and mental health on their own.

The survey identified three factors that cause moderate to very high levels of stress:

- *Poor harvests/production*
- *Government policies*
- *Farm finances*

Nationally, the majority of farmers prefer to meet one-on-one with someone to talk about stress and mental health as opposed to help through group sessions and over the telephone.

## **A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SUICIDE IDEATION AMONG MANITOBAN FARMERS**

There continue to be few Canadian studies examining suicide in rural and farm communities. To better understand this phenomenon, a qualitative research paradigm was used to analyze encounter forms of 29 individuals who called the psychological support line for farm and rural families in Manitoba, the Manitoban Farm and Rural Stress Line.

Content analysis revealed seven major themes: coping mechanisms, financial concerns, health issues, family salvation, uncontrollable events, family stress, and farm culture. Consistent with previous research, it was noted that farmers appear to experience various stressful events, with finances being a key concern. Additionally, farmers report common characteristics not conducive to help-seeking behaviour. The study indicates a need for increased services specific to Manitoba farmers.

# **ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS INVOLVED IN CANADA**

There are concerns in all provinces of Canada about the psychological health of farmers and rural communities. As a result, there are organizations dedicated to mental health issues.

## **MANITOBA**

### **Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Services**

Provides telephone and online counselling and support services to rural and northern Manitobans. They also provide public education, a volunteer training program, and a suicide bereavement support group. The “support line” includes a rural resource centre with books, videos and articles on rural mental health.

## **SASKATCHEWAN**

### **Farm Stress Line – Support for Rural Saskatchewan**

Twenty-four hours per day. Seven days per week. Free and confidential. There is no call display.

The Farm Stress Line can help by:

- *Clarifying the problem or concern and working toward a solution*
- *Connecting the person with the appropriate organization, professional or program that best meets their needs*
- *Listening and supporting in a safe, neutral and non-judgmental environment*

Crisis counsellors can help with:

- *Mental health – Stress, depression, suicidal thoughts*
- *Domestic violence*

- *Teen parent conflict*
- *Seniors abuse*
- *Relationships*
- *Parenting*
- *Addiction*
- *Child abuse and neglect*
- *Financial difficulties*

## **PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND**

### **Farm Assistance Program**

Confidential service offering professional services to farmers and their families. The program recognizes that some problems can affect home life and work performance. Services are free to farmers and their families who are members of the PEI Federation of Agriculture.

The professional counsellors have various areas of expertise, including:

- *Stress and anxiety*
- *Trauma following accidents*
- *Alcohol and drugs*
- *Bereavement*
- *Couple and marital*
- *Depression*
- *Elder care*
- *Family/parental matters*
- *Legal matters*
- *Learning disabilities*
- *Mediation*
- *Labour conflicts*
- *Career advice*
- *Mood disorders*
- *Children/adolescents*



## QUEBEC

### Au Cœur des familles agricoles

Au Cœur des familles agricoles (ACFA) is a free service to help, support, inform and establish contact.

As a non-profit organization, ACFA's mission is to create a mutual assistance network within the farming community. The organization uses a proactive and participative intervention approach. This involves everyone connected to farmers and their families. Training, awareness and mutual assistance in the community are all parts of ACFA's mission.

The goal of the organization is to refer farm families to the community resources available, as needed:

- Follow up with community agencies and services.
- Raise awareness among stakeholders involved for joint action adapted to the reality of farming.
- Take action on mental health prevention.
- Educate the public about the current realities of Quebec farms.

The organization targets:

- Farmers
- Family members
- Farm workers
- Succession

Frontline workers work with people in distress, regardless of age.

The organization has a respite house. The purpose of the "Maison ACFA" is to provide farm family members who are having difficulties a safe haven, away from the hectic farm activities, to help them recover and,

ultimately, fully recharge. The preferred approach is a helping relationship involving specialists in the problems in question. It helps:

- *offer a safe haven for farmers having difficulties;*
- *take a step back from a problem on the farm or in the family;*
- *vent concerns through active listening;*
- *encourage awareness;*
- *get out of a vicious cycle of isolation;*
- *identify problems;*
- *find solutions and give new hope;*
- *strike a balance: family, work, social life, recreation; and*
- *offer support through specialized resources.*

The statistics from the first nine months of 2016 are revealing, provide a portrait of the clientele and identify certain links to topics that concern farmers, their families and those close to them.

<b>Nombre de client à ce jour :</b>		<b>84</b>	
<b>Demandeur d'aide 1er appel</b>	Ami	7	8%
	Associé	1	1%
	Client lui-même	46	55%
	Conjoint	10	12%
	Conseiller financier	2	2%
	Enfant	3	4%
	Famille étendue	7	8%
	Fournisseur de produits agricoles	1	1%
	Parent (père, mère)	2	2%
	UPA	0	0%
	Voisin	0	0%
	Autre (préciser)	4	5%

First call for assistance

Number of clients to date:

Friend

Work partner

Client

Spouse

Financial advisor

Child

Extended family

Farm product supplier

Parent

UPA

Neighbour

Other (specify)

<b>Qui vous a parlé de nous (référé par)</b>	Ami/voisin	5	8%
	ACFA	31	47%
	CSSS	2	3%
	Employeur agricole	1	2%
	Institution financière	3	5%
	Média d'information	2	3%
	Membre de la famille	13	20%
	Organisme communautaire	0	0%
	UPA	0	0%
	Autre (préciser)	9	14%

Who told you about us (referred by)

Friend/neighbour

ACFA

Community health clinic

Farm employer

Financial institution

News media

Family member

Community agency

UPA

Other (specify)

<b>Sexe</b>	Féminin	39	47%
	Masculin	44	53%
<b>Âge moyen</b>		41,7564103	
<b>Groupe d'âge</b>	25 ans et moins	7	13%
	26-35 ans	11	21%
	36-45 ans	13	25%
	46-55 ans	13	25%
	56-65 ans	7	13%
	Plus de 65 ans	2	4%
<b>Occupation à la ferme</b>	À temps plein à la ferme	52	65%
	À temps partiel à la ferme	16	20%
	À l'extérieur de la ferme	12	15%

Gender: Female, Male

Average age

Age group: <=25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, >65

Farm occupation: On farm full time, On farm part time, Off the farm

<b>Secteur de production principale (1)</b>	Acéricole	0	0%
	Apicole	0	0%
	Avicole	0	0%
	Bovin	1	1%
	Caprin	0	0%
	Cultures commerciales	7	9%
	Cunicole	0	0%
	Fruits et légumes de transformation	0	0%
	Grand gibier	0	0%
	Laitier	53	69%
	Maraîcher	6	8%
	Ovin	1	1%
	Pomme	0	0%
	Pomme de terre	0	0%
	Porcin	7	9%
	Serricole maraîcher	0	0%
	Veau de grain	2	3%
Végétaux d'ornement	0	0%	
Viticole	0	0%	

Main agricultural production: maple syrup, beekeeping, poultry, cattle, goats, cash crops, rabbits, processed fruits and vegetables, large game, dairy, vegetables, sheep, apples, potatoes, pork, greenhouse produce, grain-fed veal, ornamental plants, vineyards

Dairy farmers alone represented 69% of ACFA's clientele in the first nine months of 2016.

## **FEDERALLY**

In 2007, the federal government created the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC). With \$130 million in funding, it has a 10-year mandate to act as a "catalyst for improving the mental health system and changing the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians around mental health issues." The creation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) was a key recommendation from the Standing Senate

Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology's 2006 report *Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada*. The MHCC undertakes numerous projects and initiatives related to mental health, including addressing stigma, helping homeless people living with mental illness, promoting knowledge exchange, and providing people with the skills and tools to help them respond to mental health issues in their daily lives.

In 2012, the MHCC released *Changing Direction, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada*, which defined six strategic directions to improve Canada's mental health care system:

1. *Promote mental health across the lifespan in homes, schools and workplaces, and prevent mental illness and suicide wherever possible.*
2. *Foster recovery and well-being for people of all ages living with mental health problems and illnesses, and uphold their rights.*
3. *Provide access to the right combination of services, treatments and supports, when and where people need them.*
4. *Reduce disparities in risk factors and access to mental health services, and strengthen the response to the needs of diverse communities and Northerners.*
5. *Work with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to address their distinct mental health needs, acknowledging their distinct circumstances, rights and cultures.*
6. *Mobilize leadership, improve knowledge, and foster collaboration at all levels.*

Jurisdiction over mental health is a complex issue because mental health is too multi-faceted to be restricted to a single level of government. It is an area where there may be overlap between provincial and territorial health care service delivery and federal regulations in criminal law, as well as with federal initiatives that are pan-Canadian in scope or target specific population groups. The Supreme Court of Canada is of the view that health is an area in which "cooperative federalism" must be

encouraged. Support for that cooperative approach to mental health is seen in the *Mental Health Strategy for Canada* from the Mental Health Commission of Canada, a strategy that invites all levels of government to play a role in efforts to follow up on its recommendations and to work together in areas of shared jurisdiction.

## **CONCLUSION**

We can establish that there is a concern across the country for the mental health of farmers, their families and their communities. Initiatives and strategies implemented at our level and in the provinces are commendable and reflect a specific need in the farm and rural sector.

Particular attention must be paid to the mental health of farmers in the workplace and within their family and community. This situation alone shows the considerable impact that stress, psychological distress or mental health situations can have on the family and community ecosystem.

It would be interesting for the Standing Committee to continue looking into this issue in order to help update our knowledge to eventually propose the most appropriate measures for farmers and rural communities.