

SFF forced to shut down after decade of unmatched success

Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) – the award-winning educational and awareness program for Australia’s farming families – is being shut down next month after a decade of outstanding success because there is no funding.

Ironically, as the Australian program disappears, farm groups from around the world are starting to adopt SFF, with a contingent from Canada at the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) this week to learn all about it.

The final Australian workshops reflect the diverse industry appeal of SFF with vignerons in Victoria’s Alpine Valley, mixed farmers from a LandCare group, croppers and egg producers at the CFA Wooronook and mixed farmers at Cavendish participating the program.

NCFH director clinical associate professor Sue Brumby said it was a tragedy such a vital program would be lost at such an important time in Australian farming.

Associate professor Brumby said despite coming out of a decade of drought, much of rural Australia was still in the recovery process, not helped by global economics, and farmers needed all the support they could get.

“The headlines in rural media tell the story – our farmers are facing some tough challenges in the next few years yet everywhere you turn more and more services are being reduced, or cut, because of funding issues,” she said.

SFF started in 2003 with funding through the Joint Research Venture for Farm Health and Safety, managed by the Rural Industries Development Research Corporation and was an immediate hit with farmers and agricultural industry groups.

Running across a 2-3 year period through their relevant industry organisation, and meeting with them in their local community, it had incredibly high retention rates and acceptance amongst farmers.

Ms Brumby said “It also trained up many rural health professionals, creating a long-term support network for all farmers by teaching these professionals to better engage with farming men and women.”

It was a visionary step for a regional health service, Western District Health Service, based in the Victorian agricultural hub of Hamilton, to develop and deliver a health, wellbeing and safety program for farming families.

Western District Health Service Chief Executive Officer Jim Fletcher said he also believed it would be a sad day for the whole agricultural industry when the last workshop was completed in July.

Mr Fletcher said one of the strengths of the SFF program was its ability to retain grassroots support and remain in touch with participants to consolidate the work they have done.

“SFF was recognised very early on with awards, and came through independent and numerous external evaluations with flying colours, having clearly demonstrated both its value for money in saved health costs and its value to individual participants, and in many cases, their families,” he said.

“SFF was also turned to by the then Victorian Department of Primary Industries during the drought, with 1500 farmers being involved in 75 locations across Victoria, followed by another 12 programs when floods replaced drought.”

Associate professor Brumby said as the program delivers its last workshop a delegation from Alberta, Canada, has arrived to see SFF in action.

She said the Canadians are looking to adapt and adopt SFF for their farmers and ranchers and will be attending the workshops in Alpine Valley and Wooroonook.

They will also be visiting the Western District Health Service, home of the SFF program, meeting with past SFF participants, visiting farms and hearing from previous funders and industry groups.

“That the success of this program has reached the other side of the world, where funding is available for its delivery is bittersweet for everyone involved by virtue of the satisfaction and pride that it will be used in another part of the world, but sadly for the moment not in Victoria or Australia.”

In closing Mr. Fletcher commented that there are still so many farmers to be reached, who need this type of program and support, and with our own state government and both sides of Federal government telling anyone who will listen that Victoria and Australia can be a food bowl for the Asian region it is hard to understand why this is not backed up with vital support funding.

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