

ON THE LAND

Editorial: 55631850 Advertising: 55631800 Email: tsim@standard.fairfax.com.au



21,000 copies weekly in the Western District
Compiled by On The Land editor TERRY SIM

Health fear



Farmers yesterday took to the Safeway supermarket shelves in Warrnambool to learn how to read product labels with the Sustainable Dairy Farming Families project's principal researcher Stuart Wilder (left).
Picture: DAMIAN WHITE 05/06/05

By TERRY SIM
HEALTH problems widespread among farmers in south-west Victoria needed urgent attention, a research project involving farming families has found.

The Sustainable Dairy Farming Families project came to Warrnambool this week after programs in Melbourne, Colac and Cobden.

Principal researcher Stuart Wilder said the program involved 128 broadacre farming families in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

"Basically this program is looking at the health status of the dairy farmer — we're trying to link their health into the triple bottom line," Mr Wilder said.

"We believe that their health is probably the most important part of their farming business."

The program had shown many farmers were at risk of heart disease, cancers and diabetes. Significant health risk factors were identified in south-west farmers for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and diseases requiring regular screening.

Participating farmers have health assessments, an opportunity to reflect on their risk factors and information on taking action.

"Certainly we are finding quite a few individuals requiring referrals — in the broadacre program 80 per cent of all participants required referrals to health services," Mr Wilder said.

"They are not in the best shape that they could be — some are really good and some are really bad," Mr Wilder said.

"Our aim is to give them the knowledge then to change it if they want to."

Project principal investigator Susan Brumby from the Western District Health Service in Hamilton said the project had highlighted the need for its expansion nationally.

Ms Brumby said it gave farmers the skills and strategies to address a plethora of health problems.

"It doesn't need a Band-Aid approach — it needs a serious integrated approach between the health sector and industry."

She said the project seemed to be making a difference to how people viewed their health in the context of their businesses.

Farmers had also found it hard to work their way through the health system and men were often unwilling to take responsibility for their health, the researchers said.

The sugar and cotton industries are also showing interest in the project, but Ms Brumby said this would require further funding.

Educators are being trained to deliver the program across Victoria.

"I think the challenge for us now is to make the Commonwealth Government and industry agree that this is a good model and actually work with it," she said.

The program has been delivered to 76 farmers and aims to reach 350 farmers.

"The evidence base should be strong enough to say this is a good program, this model should be repeated and transferred — that's what we really want," Ms Brumby said.

The dairy project is funded with \$250,000 from the Gardiner Foundation with support from lead agency Western District Health Service, RMIT, WestVic Dairy, Colac Area Health, the Department of Primary Industries and the Victorian Farmers Federation.

Drought risk for women

By TERRY SIM

AUSTRALIA'S relentless drought had the potential to trigger mental illness in farmers and their families, according to Jean Hailes Foundation psychologist Dr Amanda Deeks.

Dr Deeks said rural women were at risk of depression as they watched crops fail and their families fall into despair.

One in five Australians suffers from mental illness and the figures were higher for those who live in remote and rural areas of the country, the foundation said.

The drought, economic hardship, isolation and a lack of employment were just a few of the triggers contributing to the higher incidence of depression and mental illness in the bush.

Dr Deeks said rural women needed to recognise the signs of depression and anxiety so they could get help for themselves and for family members.

Dr Deeks suggested:

- Take stock and ask yourself: "Do I need to make some changes and why am I feeling so down?"
- Let it out and don't hold in anger or frustration. Talk to someone.
- Call on a mate.
- Don't allow yourself to be isolated. Keep talking to friends and family.
- If you have negative thoughts, take them on.
- Be active and exercise.
- Seek help. There is help available out there but you may need to travel to reach it. With good treatment you will most likely fully recover.