# Centre for Rural and Remote Area Health

# Assessing the mental health issues of climate variability affecting rural and remote communities in Southern region of Queensland

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Sowing the Seeds of Farmer Health Conference
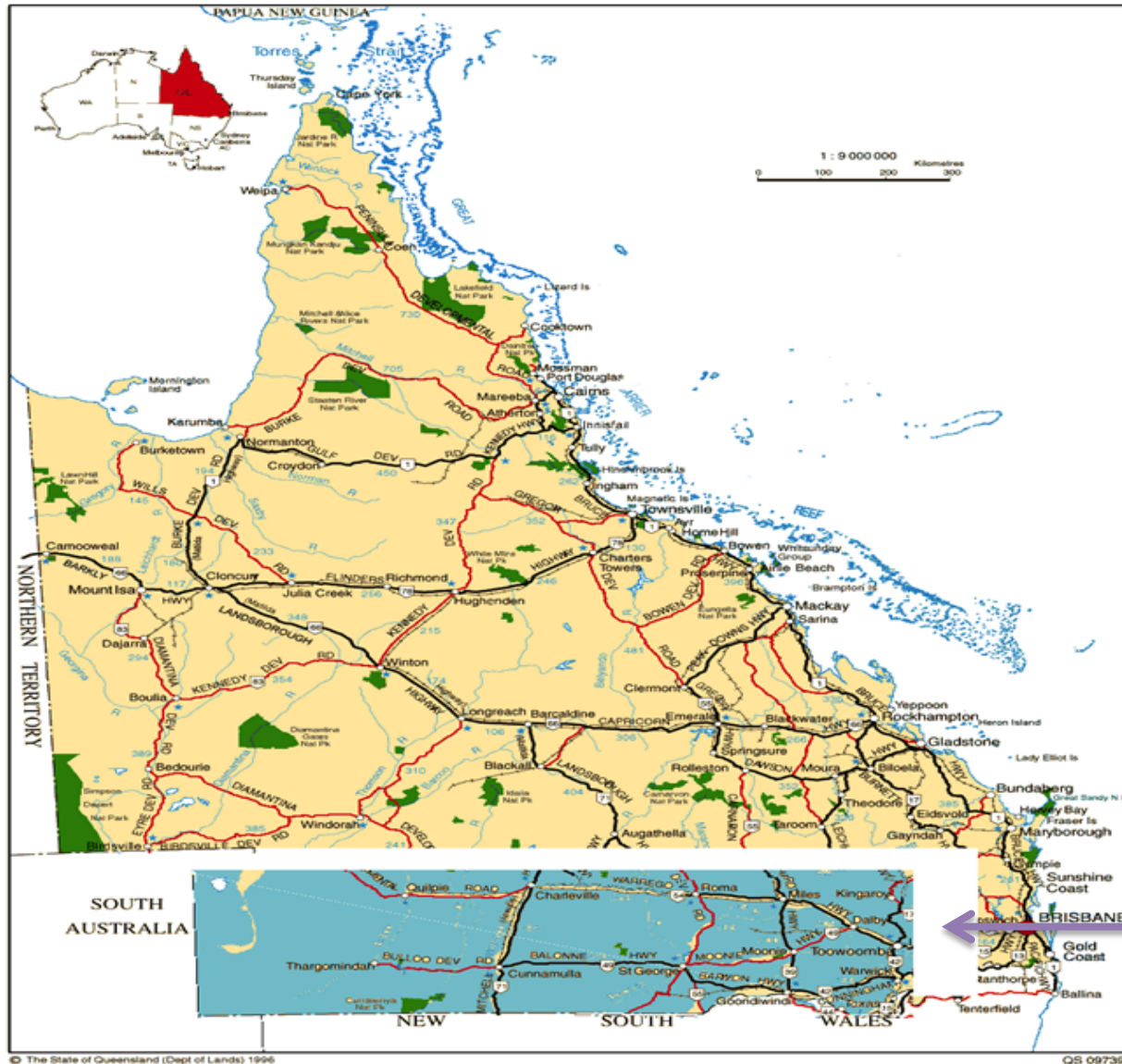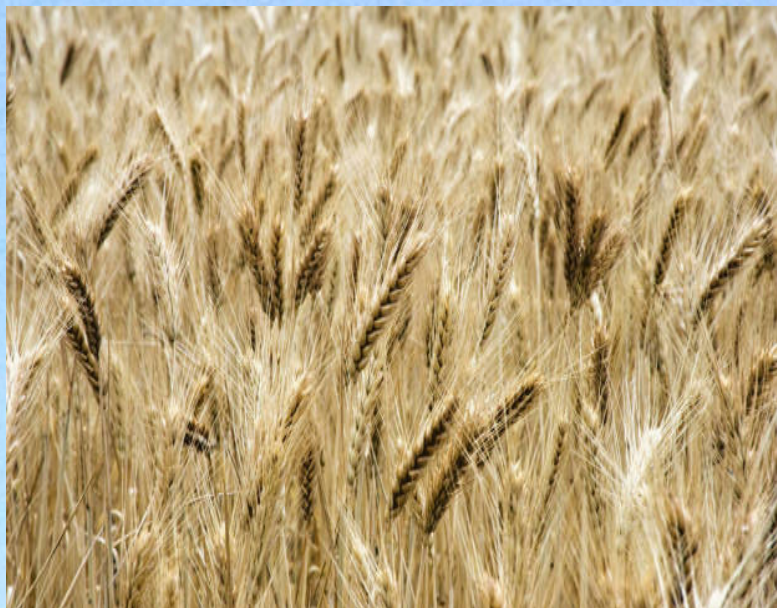Hamilton September 17-19, 2012

USQ UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA

# Project Location



Project area
highlighted

# Background: Farming-- used to be….

# Impact of Long Term Drought

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Blue Hills Paddock looking its very best in 2000|
Photographer: Robyn Mackenzie



Blue Hills paddock on Plevna Downs looking its very
worst in 2009 after 8 years of drought | Photographer: |
Robyn Mackenzie



The rain finally broke the drought but it came too fast and flood damage was wide. Plevna
Downs recorded its **biggest flood** ever - this photo was taken from the station house. |
Photographer: | Robyn Mackenzie, 2010

# Deluge on Plevna Downs



From **droughts to flooding** rains - The Mackenzies have seen it all
At  Plevna Downs, Eromanga | Photographer: (Amy Phillips , 24/5/2010)

# Impact



**Climate variability – drought, flood, off season rain**

**------------**

**Experience severe stress due to financial debt**
**Making it difficult to plan for crops, stock, breeding**
**Too much anxiety**
**Worry**
**Frustration**
**Nervousness**
**Feelings of Worthlessness**
**Lack of Confidence**

**-lead to commit suicide**

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# Project

Australian Government – Rural Industries Research and Development  Corporation (RIRDC) funded to:

a) assess the extent  and nature of mental health issues of climate variability affecting rural and remote communities

c) identify the appropriate and effective means to deal with mental health problem of the rural and remote communities.

Collaborators: USQ, QMDC, Rhealth, Centacare, AgAssist

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# Methodology

Between November 2010 and April 2011 organised 12 workshops in 12 locations in Southern region, Qld.



**60,000 people; 13% of Qld(224,983km$^{2)}$ ~ 3.29 times of Tasmania: almost equal to Victoria (227,416km$^2$)**

# Methodology

Over 238 representatives from farmers; local business people, service providers (government and NGOs); Queensland Country Women Association; and Aboriginal people participated in the workshops.

Each workshop ran for 3-4 hours exploring the following questions:

- What climate variability issues are contributing to uncertainty and stress in the local region?
- What services and facilities are available in the rural and remote communities?
- What gaps are there and where is the need?
- What measures can be taken to address these gaps and needs?

# Climate variability issues- Social issues

| Social Issues | # of community (n=12) |
|---|---|
| Succession planning | 7 |
| Changing community structure | 6 |
| Children moving away for education | 5 |
| Tyranny of distance and isolation | 5 |
| Relationship breakdown | 4 |
| Lack of support groups | 4 |
| Social isolation | 4 |

Other issues :
➢ limited youth employment
➢ stoicism
➢ disempowerment
➢ lack of access to family support
➢ inability to gain full time work
➢ reduction in Ministry (Church) services
➢ connectedness between towns and farms, etc.

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# Economic issues

| Economic Issues | #of community (n=12) |
|---|:---:|
| High costs of living | 7 |
| Lack of transport | 7 |
| Rising costs of production | 6 |
| Inability to get a good return on production and capital | 5 |
| Closure of businesses | 5 |
| Cash flow | 4 |
| Cost of finance and banks | 4 |

Other issues:
- difficulty of retaining staff across all industries
- increased reliance on Centrelink
- absentee landlords
- struggling to manage finances
- practical training for agricultural industry

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# Health issues

| Health issues | # of community (n=12) |
|---|---|
| Lack of doctors | 8 |
| Alcohol and drug use | 7 |
| Stigma associated with mental health | 7 |
| Continuity of services | 6 |
| Lack of support services | 4 |
| Deterioration of health services | 4 |
| Lack of awareness between stressors on the farm & mental health | 4 |
| Relocation of health services away from the community | 3 |
| Lack of counselling services | 3 |
| Lack of professional support | 3 |
| Other health issues:<br>  ➢ lack of hospital beds<br>  ➢ lack of youth health workers<br>  ➢ mental health training<br>  ➢ anxiety and depression<br>  ➢ perceived confidentiality<br>  ➢ cost of mental health treatment | |

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# Government Policy

| Government policy | # of community (n=12) |
|---|---|
| Vegetation clearing legislation | 7 |
| Water policy of the government | 7 |
| Lack of understanding by government of the needs of communities | 6 |
| Withdrawal of funding to good projects | 6 |
| Lack of support for local business | 6 |
| Threats to the cypress industry | 4 |
| Council amalgamation | 4 |

Other issues:
- dairy deregulation
- poor council planning
- slow response to flood insurance
- loss of agricultural colleges
- reduction in transport services

# Gaps in services and facilities

*Health and support services*
- Networking between services, follow-up care, and lack of cohesion between support groups and agencies were identified as gaps.

*Communication facilities and services*
- Knowledge about how to access the services;
- addressing the issue of stigma; recognition of mental health concerns;
- perceived confidentiality; ignoring the issues of mental health; etc.

*Education and training*
- Providing access to quality education and training for health professionals; education for families about mental health problems; addressing fear and stigma; addressing the ignorance of rural people and their well-being; lack of skills to address issues if something wrong is noticed.

*Other facilities*
- Financial support to run events *(Tie Up Black Dog)* and engage manpower, as well as recurring funding to support workers in farming communities.

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# Measures to minimise the gaps

1. Mental health training

- Mental health training to farmers including training to support agents that visit on-farm such as agronomists, rural financial counsellors, and business people working in the rural centre.

- Providing training as part of existing rural events such as field days and agricultural shows, as well as sessions for high school students and health professionals was a key suggestion.

2. Information awareness

- Raising awareness to reduce the stigma associated with mental health is a priority area. This can be achieved by providing resources at local suppliers, spots on the ABC radio, articles in local papers and school newsletters, and using community events to educate on depression and mental health.

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# Measures to minimise gaps

3. Service delivery

- developing health professional networks
- recurring funds for good programs and services
- more extension officers, **multi-skilled counsellors** based in towns with free referral
- central point of contact, and
- raising awareness of help lines.

4. Fostering collaboration

- Improved coordination between services, generation of local groups (e.g. Men's Sheds), increased community group involvement, and interaction for farming families.

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# Conclusions

1. A common theme that emerged from the workshops is that rural people and their surrounding communities are under sustained stress resulting from a mix of droughts, floods, and vegetation and water policy. All were seen to impact on mental health and community well-being. A key cause of mental health problems related to loss of control due to climate events and government legislation.

3. Lack of awareness, coordination and leadership restricted the value of and access to the services. Another key issue is that many of the remote communities have infrequent, limited access to formal services.

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## Conclusions

**3.    G**reater networking and collaborations between agencies and groups concerned with mental health issues needed.

4.   High level of interest in obtaining Mental Health First Aid training.

   Awareness and training could be better incorporated into other activities being run  within the communities. For example, when an agronomy workshop was run, or in conjunction with Chamber of

Commerce activities.

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# Thank you!

Any Question!

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# Next Step: Action

➢ Develop and test a robust framework : Provide leadership, foster collaboration and build healthier rural and remote communities

We proposed a case study using a Participatory Action Research method to develop the framework, map out pathways and build the capacity of the rural and remote communities during the process.

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