Talking Tough Times: What 700 Aussie Farmers Want You to Hear

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Rural Aid's second Pulse of the Paddock survey offers an in-depth look at the emotional, social, and business wellbeing of Australian farmers. Nearly 700 primary producers, including fruit and vegetable growers, responded to this survey in October 2024. Their insights shed light on widespread challenges, especially mental health, service access, and sustainability, all issues highly relevant to berry farmers.

The 2025 Pulse of the Paddock survey combined multiple-choice and open-ended questions, collecting feedback from 687 farmers registered with Rural Aid. The majority of respondents were primary producers across various farm sizes: 40% farmed 101–1000 acres, and 39% managed 1001–10,000 acres. Production types included cattle, sheep, and broadacre farming, as well as fruit, vegetable, dairy, poultry, and aquaculture operations. This breadth makes the report's findings broadly applicable across the horticulture industry, including berry production.

One of the most urgent themes is farmer mental health. A concerning 58% of surveyed farmers described their mental health as "average or below," and 21% reported a decline in their mental wellbeing over the past 12 months. The facts are confronting: Australian farmers take their own lives at a rate 59% higher than the national average. Yet 36% of those struggling didn't seek help, with many expressing discomfort around asking for support.

However, signs of progress are emerging. One-third of respondents indicated a positive shift in their attitude toward accessing mental health services, reflecting a gradual cultural change. Notably, 61% of farmers said they would now reach out for counselling support for themselves, and 75% would do so for their families.

For berry growers who face season-dependent income, physically demanding work, and the constant risk of climate extremes, these findings reinforce the need to normalise help-seeking and to stay connected with support services.

Community connection was another major theme. A vast 94% of farmers said their local community was essential to accessing services such as health care, childcare, and postal services. Despite this, 38% reported facing significant barriers to accessing these services.

These barriers included:

- **Isolation:** Long travel times, poor roads, and high fuel costs
- **Service shortages:** Lack of healthcare professionals, poor phone and internet coverage
- **Financial pressure:** Low, irregular or uncertain income and limited eligibility for government support
- **Time constraints:** The all-consuming 24/7 nature of farming made scheduling appointments or training difficult

Yet, 85% of respondents still felt a strong connection to their community, citing sporting groups, shows, and other local events as crucial for mental wellbeing and

practical support. For berry farmers who often rely on seasonal labour and may work in remote or semi-urban fringe areas investing in community ties can create vital buffers against stress and isolation.

Encouragingly, the report highlights a strong appetite among farmers to learn and adapt. Of the respondents who participated in sustainability education programs 83% made changes based on what they learned and an even higher 86% observed positive outcomes on their farms as a result.

Reported benefits included:

- **Healthier ecosystems:** Improved pasture, better water retention, and healthier soils
- **Efficiency gains:** Lower costs and inputs through reduced chemical use and tech-driven time savings
- **Resilience to climate events:** Such as drought-proofing and carbon capture

The barriers to uptake were consistent; a lack of time and financial resources to attend courses or trial new methods. But there's a clear willingness to adopt sustainable practices when the support is practical, accessible, and tailored.

This is particularly relevant to berry growers who are managing perennial or semi-perennial crops where soil health, water efficiency, and biodiversity all contribute to pest management, yield and marketability.

The overall mood among farmers was cautiously optimistic. While more than half of the respondents believed they could achieve their goals this year, 69% felt unprepared to manage looming threats like financial pressure, drought, and volatile market conditions.

This sense of unease highlights a few clear takeaways for industry stakeholders and government bodies:

1. Normalise and fund mental health support

Farmers are increasingly open to mental health conversations. Continued investment in local, culturally appropriate counselling services will accelerate this trend and prevent burnout and poor decision-making on-farm.

2. Support local communities

Enhancing transport, communication infrastructure, and access to rural services will address major pain points. For berry producers reliant on seasonal workforces, improving local amenity and services can also assist in worker retention.

3. Scale up sustainability training

Flexible, accessible sustainability education (e.g., online courses, on-farm demos, peer learning groups) would empower more growers to improve productivity and resilience. Even small grants or time-saving tools could remove current barriers.

4. Long-term support and advocacy

As uncertainty becomes a norm, from climate events to global price fluctuations, farmers need consistent, long-term support. This includes farm advocacy groups lobbying for better connectivity, freight subsidies, affordable insurance, and transitional funding for adopting regenerative systems.

The *Pulse of the Paddock* report paints a complex yet hopeful picture. Australian farmers - including berry growers - are facing real pressure but are also showing strength, adaptability, and a growing openness to change. By investing in mental health, community resilience, and sustainable farming education, the industry can safeguard its future through good seasons and bad.

Berry growers are encouraged to stay engaged in local networks, seek out training when possible, and use services like Rural Aid to support themselves, their families, and their businesses through the ups and downs of farming life.

Freshcare certified businesses, their staff and immediate family members can also access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providing confidential counselling, coaching, and wellbeing services provided by TELUS Health - free of charge.