

# The Landscape of Dairy Farming Work Stress

## Report to the Dairy Industry 2006

A report on the causes and impacts of stress on South Australian dairy farmers has been compiled as part of a PhD thesis by University of South Australia Psychologist student Alison Wallis.



The deregulation of the Australian dairy industry in 2000 provided the impetus for this research, which investigated risk factors for SA dairy farmers' psychological strain, including the chronic effects of work demands and control and industry support that SA dairy farmers experienced at that point in time. The Australian Research Council funded the research with support from DairySA.

The report aimed to:

- Identify and analyse the risk factors for stress in dairy farming
- Test the relevance of work stress theories for SA dairy farmers and their families
- Contribute to the scientific body of knowledge concerning theories of stress in a previously occupational population of owner-operators (dairy farmers), which will assist in finding job-relevant ways to reduce work stress

The study found that dairy farmers have extremely high stress levels, which exceed that of several other Australian occupations. General work demands, such as time pressures and hard and fast work requirements, have an immediate and negative effect upon farmers' psychological health, as do lower feelings of control over how to run the farm business and less access to necessary business skills.

A number of key stressors in the farming and dairy-specific literature were identified as being related to psychological health, including:

- Weather and climate conditions
- Drought
- Financial demands
- Environmental demands
- Physical shed conditions
- Deregulation change stressors
- Industry social supports
- Dairy status, technology, labour and succession planning demands

The report also suggested further actions, including communicating the results at dairy-related conferences (ensuring that the focus is on forward-thinking and finding solutions to the issue of 'people as resources'), and using the project information to lobby for farmers across agriculture industries as issues may be similar – for example, improved consultation and more flexibility on environmental regulatory matters.

A group of industry representatives from DairySA provided support for Ms Wallis during the PhD study. At a workshop in 2005, this group identified some areas of stress and issues which dairy farmers and industry may be able to control or improve – including better financial and business management skills, and improved dairy shed and working conditions – as opposed to uncontrollable issues such as the weather, drought and deregulation.

Industry, through Dairy Australia's national programs and DairySA is already taking steps to continue to improve dairy farmers' skills. Examples of this include Cow Time, Taking Stock, Forage Skills, 3030, SE Forage Innovation, succession planning workshops and an effluent management advisory service. A project to analyse the business performance of a range of SA dairy farms is also being facilitated by PIRSA as part of the State Dairy Plan implementation program.

For further information about the study, please contact DairySA on 08 8766 0127.

T: 08 8766 0127  
F: 08 8766 0005  
E: DAIRYSA@BORDERNET.COM.AU

PO BOX 235  
LUCINDALE SA 5272

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