

Understanding the impacts of new developments (energy & mining) on farmers in the Wimmera Southern Mallee

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Overview:

Between February and June 2025, seventeen farmers from the Wimmera Southern Mallee were interviewed to explore their perspectives on the impact of new industry developments in their communities. These developments included wind and solar energy projects, mineral sands mining, and transmission line infrastructure.

This work was initiated in response to discussions with Yarriambiack Shire Council and the Southern Wimmera Renewables Research Association.

Concerns had been raised about the impact of the significant number of proposed developments requiring engagement with farmers, and how expectations to engage and respond were impacting the mental health of farmers in the region, and their sense of connection to local networks and community. The research was intended to understand the experiences of farmers in navigating these expectations, to better understand the impact it had on individuals and their ability to engage meaningfully.

The study explores issues of mental health impact, through building an understanding of the relationship between the individual, agency and social structures (Ramirez-Ferraro, 2005). The research explores the impacts felt by farmers in navigating through a period of rapid change in expectations for agricultural land use. External pressures on the values, identity and connection that agricultural producers and family farmers hold is resulting in significant upheaval and mental health impacts at individual level. It is also rapidly changing the understanding of community and place.

Research Approach:

This qualitative research project used a methodology of critical ethnography to explore the issues underlying the mental health concerns raised by farmers in the region.

Confidential interviews were conducted individually with farmers between February and June 2025. Farmers were identified through local networks and invited to participate. Interviews were conducted via a mix of in-person, internet based (MS Teams) and telephone calls.

Farmers were asked a series of questions about their farm business, values-based questions about agriculture, experiences with new industries to the region, how they felt they were coping with these changes (mental health) and concluded with questions about the future of the region and potential learnings from these developments.

What we found:

Mental Health Impacts are real

Interviews with farmers highlighted that many people in the farming community have been dealing with the prospect of change from new industry developments for a long time, but also that this pressure was growing as multiple new projects were appearing and expectations to engage with multiple projects and processes increased. This has created uncertainty for farming operations, and concerns about property rights. Expectations of sustained engagement with processes that were unfamiliar and procedurally required a skill set that farmers felt ill-equipped to manage.

Farmers reported mental health impacts linked to a loss of control over outcomes, and deep uncertainties about the future of their business and their family life as developments seek an interest in the land where their business operates and their family lives.

The demands of making submissions, conducting research and engaging with stakeholders – in addition to their farm business work left little time for social or recreational activities that might offer relief and provide some perspective. For many, this increased burden has reinforced a sense of isolation and disconnect.

There was clear frustration, and for many, exhaustion about the repeated need to engage with government and industry over proposed developments, often with very little recognition of the cumulative impacts these processes have on individuals and at family level. Farmers also felt that they had difficulty in seeing how their efforts to engage were being meaningfully utilized. Not being able to see return on investment from this engagement resulted in a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion.

Farmers, regardless of their stance on new industries, acknowledged ongoing demands are causing significant long-term strain for individuals, families and communities. This ongoing distress is transforming communities and relationships.

Everything is overwhelming and its hard to move forward

I would give anything to just to have some peace, we seem to be fighting something all the time

*We don't socialize as much as we used to, we've lost contact with some people.
We're more careful about what we say*

Rural solidarity under strain

Farmers described a breakdown in shared expectations of community unity in the face of change brought by new industry. As relationships were redefined along issue-based lines, many expressed grief—regardless of their stance—over the loss of traditional forms of connection and mutual support.

There is strong evidence to indicate that the concept of 'community' is undergoing rapid change in the Wimmera Southern Mallee, with people realigning their sense of community

with others who share similar values and perspectives. While this is largely self-protective for people under pressure, the result of this is likely to be more isolated perspectives as people limit engagement to people who share similar values and feel safe.

The research indicates that, for farmers the idea of community may be becoming less about place, and more about values. This will require new consideration around issues of leadership, engagement and resourcing, particularly for small rural towns, and geographic entities such as local government.

Shifting identities and roles

Farmers were uncomfortable about increased policy intervention changing the scope of agricultural production. Most of the farmers interviewed saw themselves as farmers, not as energy producers or participants in the mining industry.

There was also a sense of being trapped within conflicting moral agendas, with government incentivising renewable energy for decarbonisation, supporting an industrialisation of agriculture through prioritising external industry development. At the same time, farmers felt that the responsibility to provide clean, safe food should be a stronger priority, and have better protections from the risks posed by mining, renewables and transmission.

As a result, the research found that a new set of values are being established around farmer identity that supports an 'agriculture-only' focus as a more appropriate approach to farming than engaging in hybrid industry as a response.

Rejecting financial incentives to change is, for some, an important part of demonstrating commitment to agriculture and the profession and closely tied to values of family and intergenerational farming.

They say the money will drought proof your business – I've done a lot of work to drought proof my business – I've created that space – they're minimizing the skills of farming. They're marketing to farmers that we need the money – I would be a fool to say that we don't need the money, but it comes at the expense of too much

Value of heritage and future vision

Family connection and intergenerational ties old particularly important value for farmers in the Wimmera Southern Mallee and factor strongly in farmer decision making. For many, this was identified as an equal or higher value driver for decision-making than economics.

Within the research, farmers highlighted the importance of long-term and sometimes intergenerational decision making around farming enterprises, they spoke strongly of their connection to past generations farming the same land and identified aspirations for their children to farm the same land. Many highlighted that uncertainty around change was creating uncertainty for their children's future. Concerns surfaced about new developments potentially breaking this connection.

Farmers felt that industry and government failed to grasp the importance of deep intergenerational familial ties as a central to farming—its traditions, legacy, and long-term commitments. Farmers within the study identified that generally, farms were continuing a trajectory of getting bigger with larger machinery, economies of scale, increasingly involving

multiple family members and employees. Yet, they still held strongly that farms are family businesses.

There is an inherent tension in this as farming family businesses engage with the profit-driven priorities of industry and the procedural focus of government. Family farms are often relational and not necessarily democratic. Nor are they necessarily most swayed by economic opportunities, particularly if they fall in conflict with more strongly held values such as intergenerational ownership, and familial connection.

Engaging in this space to present an economic opportunity often created significant tension within family dynamics, and farmers highlighted situations where this pressure put relational values at risk.

*I don't worry about the money – its about the future of the land for generations to come that I want to protect
I have a son, a little boy, 6th generation. We travel out from [town] each day to farm, I hope he will be able to farm*

I feel like we're letting down the ancestors because we couldn't stop this from happening – its outside our control

City people do not comprehend that farms are multigenerational

Respect for agriculture

Farmers had a lot of pride in being agricultural producers and rated highly their efforts to ensure efficiency, and environmental stewardship of their land.

There was significant concern that the agricultural sector was being sidelined or dismissed in the push to meet net zero policy goals, and address fiscal concerns within the Victorian government. Some participants felt this policy focus on large scale projects with corporate investment for the generation of renewable energy, and the scale of effort required to engage in these spaces has lessened potential for farmers to consider local innovation that could support similar outcomes within farm business operations.

Farmers reported frustrations that their own contributions to net-zero were being overlooked. Expectations were high for farmers to host landscape changing developments to support urban populations that would experience no physical or visual impact, and no limitations to development because of this change.

At a more pragmatic level, there was also a perceived lack of stewardship around ensuring agricultural interests were protected from the unintended consequences of hosting mining, transmission and renewables on agricultural land. This was largely linked to concerns about rehabilitation and decommissioning.

However, there were also concerns raised about risks of foreign investment and control of farmland. This has strong historical policy links at a national level, and also highlights a lack of exposure and transparency in the region to external investment opportunities.

Our farm is completely off grid, so you feel like you've done your bit – and then I'm being asked to do more. Being surrounded by turbines is not fair.

Who allows a foreign owned entity to have a buffer zone on my farm? – I didn't agree to that

Agriculture doesn't have a seat at the table – we know it adds a lot of export value to Victoria, but it doesn't even rank. They've dehumanized farmers

Through the experience of COVID, farmers were the backbone of the country, still work to provide food and resources – this feels contradictory. How we've forgotten this in such a short time is beyond me

Why these stressors are different

Farmers operate in a highly variable environment, subject to climatic impacts and extremes of market variability, all of which impact economic returns, farm viability and connection. To some extent, these impacts could be seen as just another stressor for farmers to navigate.

However, farmers highlighted that, while painful, there is a sense of solidarity in drought or fire impacts as communities are brought together and can work towards a common goal of keeping people safe and managing through difficult conditions. Farmers highlighted the long term, often intergenerational effort to build resilience at farm level and in communities to prepare for and manage through these types of impacts.

There was a sense that these impacts are different, in that there is no history of how to respond to this type of change that can be drawn upon. Engagement at property level is forcing individualised responses, and ultimately a fracturing of relationships as farmers make different choices about how to respond.

We lived through the millennial drought. People would be doing it tough – we were brothers in arms. Now they've managed to make two tribes out of us

The environmental conditions, that's what makes us resilient. We cope with that, not everyone can do it, it's a rollercoaster we endure

You can't do much about mother nature, but a decision by someone in an office?

What would help:

Validate emotional responses & prioritise community

Recognise that, for farmers, feelings of anger, grief, and distress are normal responses to large-scale and rapid transformation that may have impacts on farm operations, and connection to the land.

The research has highlighted it is the values held by farmers that are profoundly impacting how people feel about change. There is a need to find space to acknowledge and respect these issues in policy responses.

It is also necessary to recognise that some social networks are no longer working well to support people and provide safe spaces, e.g. CFA, and people under pressure are not naturally seeking low stakes social engagement.

Farmers are building new spaces to support each other and stay connected, but these spaces can be issues based and politically charged. They aren't necessarily supporting opportunities to rest and recharge.

The work highlights a need to prioritise development (or reinvigoration) of safe spaces for people to find respite.

Strengthen legislative and policy protections for agriculture and farmer wellbeing

There were three areas highlighted by farmers as particular areas of concern with regard to proposed developments. Investing in actions to respond to these concerns would help address some of the risks farmers see with the pace of change.

Improve confidence and security around decommissioning and rehabilitation

Farmers have ongoing concerns about the rehabilitation and decommissioning of projects. There is a need to ensure that proponents cannot walk away from projects at end of life, despite bond conditions. Concerns around foreign ownership and the limitations of enforcement were also highlighted. While there was awareness of government rehabilitation requirements in a broad sense, farmers wanted to ensure that rehabilitation panels included community and agricultural representation. Rehabilitation outcomes should be satisfactory to those living in proximity, not just technical specialists.

Inclusion of agricultural and socio-cultural impacts in future planning processes

A greater emphasis on protecting and valuing agricultural land within the region is supported. There are concerns about the scale of proposed changes and how this may impact the future of agricultural production and stewardship of the landscape. An approach which improves legal protections for existing agricultural production, and reduces the ability to use neighbouring agricultural land for buffer zones is supported.

Introduce geographic and cumulative impact analysis into project assessment

Farmers felt that development approvals should more strongly account for the combined impact of multiple new developments within a rural area, recognising the broader pressure this can have on expectations for engagement as well as on infrastructure and service access.

Community benefits need community

Current approaches to "community benefit" risk missing the mark if they assume a stable or shared understanding of what "community" means. As rural communities experience significant social and economic shifts, traditional place-based identities are being redefined, possibly around values rather than geography.

In this context, a narrow focus on transactional or grant-based benefits may be inadequate. Instead, what's needed is a broader, values-driven conversation about:

- Who the community is
- What kinds of benefits matter
- How those benefits are delivered, governed, and sustained
- Where the limits/or opportunities are for individual benefit schemes and collaborative outcomes to provide for transformational change

How was this funded?

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Local Mental Health Supports

Urgent Mental Health Support – Grampians Health

Ph: 1300 247 647

Uniting Care Wimmera Grampians Mental Health Service (Step Thru Care)

Ph: 5362 4000

Grampians Community Health Intake

Ph: 5358 7400

East Wimmera Health & Wellbeing Counselling Service

Ph: 5477 2222

Royal Flying Doctor Service – Wellbeing

Ph: 8412 0480

Rural Financial Counselling Service

Ph: 1300 735 578

Services Available 24 hrs:

Lifeline

Ph: 13 14 11

Beyond Blue

Ph: 1300 224 636

Head to Health National

Phone: 1800 595 212

Your local GP can also provide referrals for mental health support.