Why Are Australian Dairy Farmers Struggling and What Is the Impact on Their Cows?

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Abstract We were honoured to be asked to contribute to a special edition dedicated to the work of Deidre Wicks, a scholar and activist whose work we greatly admired. Deidre's concern for the animals of Australia (and elsewhere) shone through in every conversation we had with her. Her love of and dedication to cows and making their lives better was especially clear. It is with this in mind that we offer this short commentary that reflects on our work done with dairy farmers in Australia. We draw on research we conducted with 21 dairy farmers to consider why Australian dairy farmers are struggling and what the potential impacts of these struggles are on their cows. We conclude with a discussion of the future possibilities of dairy farming.

Keywords dairy farmers, dairy cows, mental health, cow health, cow wellbeing

Dairy cow illustration by Heather Fraser, 2025

Introduction

The Australian dairy industry has undergone radical changes in the last two decades largely due to the economic pressures the industry has faced for some time. Several factors have precipitated this change, including but not limited to:

- Banking practices that show little empathy with farmers.
- Broader economic pressures associated with decreasing incomes along with higher workload demands.
- Increasing and time-consuming bureaucracy associated with government oversight and assistance.
- Difficulties attracting reliable workers amid general declines in rural infrastructure, and associated lack of social interaction and loneliness.

- The growing effects of climate change, including increased periods of drought and fire.
- The deregulation of milk prices, which have seen significant drops in income for farmers.
- Water politics, including disputes over water access and licensing systems.
- Economic pressures to 'improve efficiencies' including an increase in scale of dairy farms (i.e. increase herd size), and,
- The growth of animal welfare science and associated technologies, especially those that justify the intensification of farming and promote cost-saving animal husbandry practices without anaesthesia (e.g., Brumby et al.; Fragar, Henderson et al.; Fragar, Kelly et al.; Kennedy et al.; Stain et al.).

Research has demonstrated that these pressures, and others, contribute to an increased risk of compromised mental health for some farmers. Earlier research by Judd et al. found that attitudinal barriers to seeking help for mental health problems, along with a limited capacity to acknowledge and address increasing stressors, led to an elevated risk of suicide among farmers in Australia. Research has also shown that the health and wellbeing of farmers is linked to the health and wellbeing of their animals. For example, early research that focussed on animal 'productivity' and human personality found milk yield to be lower when cows were fearful of the humans who worked with them (Hemsworth et al.); that positive human-animal relationships lowered infection rates among the dairy herds they studied (Ivemeyer et al.); and that there is a relationship between empathic interactions with cows and their milk production, for example (Kielland et al.; Ivemeyer). Research has also shown there to be links between farmer mental health and the health and wellbeing of their herds. For example, Olff et al. found substantial psychological distress – specifically PTSD – among Dutch farmers whose animals were culled during a food and mouth epidemic. Similarly, Peck detailed elevated levels of psychological morbidity among farmers and other directly affected rural workers in the UK due to slaughter of animals during the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak.

With this research in mind, we discuss below some of the reasons Australian dairy farmers are struggling and what the impact of this might be on their cows, taking data from a study we undertook with Australian dairy farmers.

The research project

The discussion below is based on research from part of a larger project (partially funded by Animals Australia). That project aimed to investigate whether farmers themselves identify potential links between mental ill-health and specific working practices; to understand if compromised mental health affects animal welfare directly or indirectly; to assess potential barriers to recruiting farmers to participate in research into their on-farm practices; and to understand how these barriers might be overcome. Ethical approval was provided by Flinders University, South Australia, as it was the initial host to the project when both researchers worked there.

Methods

For the larger study we completed a total of 29 individual interviews with 21 dairy farmers (past or present) and 8 dairy industry consultants in South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The data we draw on for this discussion below is from the farmers only. Of the 21 dairy farmers, 10 were women and 11 were men. Topics covered throughout the interviews covered farm practices, farmer wellbeing and animal welfare, as well as potential barriers to the recruitment of farmers to studies like this. Data saturation (where no new themes emerge from our analysis of the interviews) was reached at around 20 interviews, but we continued as we had 9 more farmers express an interest in participating in the research.

Analysis

All the interviews were professionally transcribed and entered into NVivo12 Pro to allow us to conduct a thematic analysis at the semantic level (Braun and Clarke). Initially we focussed on developing broad themes present in the work (e.g., 'animal welfare' or 'human welfare'). Following this both authors conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke) whereby themes within and across the broad initial themes were identified (e.g., within 'animal welfare' issues regarding calving or insemination). Alongside this we conducted a critical, narrative analysis with seven overlapping phases: (1) Hearing the stories, experiencing each other's emotions while listening back to the interviews; (2) Re-reading transcriptions; (3) Segmenting individual transcripts into stories and codifying themes, taking note of any unexpected revelations or contradictions; (4) Scanning across different domains of experience to consider structural, cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of narratives; (5) Linking the personal with the political; (6) Looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and (7) Writing an accurate and trustworthy representation of participants' experiences (Fraser).

Discussion

For this current paper we have chosen to outline and discuss two key themes that emerged from our research project. This is because, taken together, they tell a story of how current pressures on dairy farmers impact them and their herds. These findings are (1) pressures related to increasing farm scale, and (2) the impact of the specific practices of separating cows and calves and killing farmed animals on human health. We then offer a brief outline of our findings regarding the links between farmer mental health and cow health.

Farm Scale - The Pressure to Get Big or Get Out

The conditions for dairy farming in Australia have undergone dramatic changes in recent decades, largely due to the economic pressures the industry has faced for some time. The

industry has faced (and continues to do so) pressure toward greater 'efficiencies' which often manifest in larger economies of scale (Lyson and Gillespie). As a result, over the last few decades the average dairy herd size has increased while the number of farms has decreased, leading to larger operations. Milk production has increased at the same time as a decrease in cow numbers meaning that in certain countries milk increase has occurred almost exclusively through increased milk production per cow (Barkema et al.; Voiceless and Wicks). This increased production causes metabolic strain on cows (i.e., the struggle to ingest enough calories to provide the energy for unnatural milk production levels) is linked with an increase in mastitis, lameness and ultimately the early death of cows (Wicks).

Along with compromising cow health, large scale farming based on 'streamlining efficiencies' also decreases opportunities for empathic and individualised care for cows (see e.g., Loveridge). The farmers we interviewed realised this and most farmers had concerns about increasingly larger farms, particularly that they led to separation from their animals:

> Yeah farms are growing, like it's rare to find 100 sort of cow farm now, they're all 400, 800, 1200 –… so it's a big, it just becomes, you're not connected to your animals on that level. So, it's hard for farmers to, yeah to find that connection. [Sylvia, current female dairy farmer]

> When I was milking less cows, I got pretty upset when I lost one, because you're trying to build up numbers. Well once you get the numbers, it's just a number. [Jeremy, current male dairy farmer]

> …the part that upsets me is that that animal husbandry and those old farm practices and love for their animals and individual treatment as things are needed … a lot of it's been lost because the milking side of it with these hundreds and hundreds of cows is becoming a mechanical factory type job that those people are just doing the mechanical thing but they haven't got the decades and decades of experience

> because the old dairy farm, the old-style dairy farm had to be a vet, had to clip the toenails, had to do this, could just look at an animal and know it was sick.
> [Wayne, current male dairy farmer]

Many of the farmers noted that smaller scale farms allowed them to know their cows as individuals, which helped them monitor their health closely:

> I mean smaller scale allows you to notice details…I think that when things are going wrong in a big system you see the outcome at the end when things are really – where all the animals are sick or you've got massive effluent pools that are pollution the river down the stream or whatever, but I think that on a smaller scale you notice things – sick animals you know them by name or number or whatever.
> [Kedra, female industry consultant]

> And who's milking them, you get the bigger farms and they have a team of milkers and I said this to the vet one time, how do you get on when you go to the big farms? He said well by the time we get there, the cow is nearly dead because if you're milking them yourself and you know, you do have an interest, as soon as the cow comes in and you go to put the cups on her you could, oh she hasn't got much milk so you have a quick visual appraisal of the cow or she might come in last when she's always first because they all come in in their same order and so you take their temperature or if something…severe you'd get the vet out.
> [Barry, recently retired male dairy farmer]

> I'm not – I'm not supportive of – really of that sort of farming, when you have a dairy that's running 7000 cows … it's all computerised, they've got 7 sheds that hold a thousand cows, they milk them 3 times a day, it's just a factory.
> [Jack, current male dairy farmer]

While there is much dispute over what constitutes the mistreatment of farmed animals, several farmers we spoke with expressed their concerns about animal neglect and cruelty, arguing that intensive farming systems were more conducive to these harms taking place:

> There are things that you have to do with your livestock at times that people that are really into the animal welfare don't like and … What if they're thinking probably oh, probably a good thing if a whole heap of dairy men go out of business. Well trouble is what they're going to be left with is more like these massive corporate farms… That a cow, instead of it having a name and you knowing its family history and all that. It's just going to be production unit, and who do they think's going to look after their livestock better? Something's that's almost not much better than a battery hen or somebody that's hand raised all their own stock can know where, where they've come from with their lineage and mostly got a name for them… And care about them, so who they do think is going to take better care? So, they might be happy to see us smaller guys go out of the picture but we're the ones that actually take better care of our livestock than probably the big operators.
> [Gary, current male dairy farmer].

Along with concerns over the impacts of farm size on the welfare of cows, our farmers also highlighted two specific practices that caused considerable distress and/or ambivalence: separating cows and calves and killing farmed animals.

Separating Cows and Calves

The issue of separation between cows and calves was a vexed one for many of our farmers. At least half a dozen women dairy farmers winced when we raised the topic, aware of the sensitivities and for some, very aware of the pain associated for cows and calves, but also for themselves and/or their children witnessing the practice. Sometimes women farmers told emotional childhood stories about cows being separated from their mothers, either into

other pens or onto trucks for slaughter. When asked directly, some women dairy farmers related to the cows through their own experiences of motherhood:

> A: Well, I felt a sad part about that part is we're looked after when we give birth to a baby and the poor old cow – she's out in the storms. I can always remember – Doug hates storms. And I rang him up and said, 'Oh, Doug, you've got a cow up the back of … here.' And I said, 'She seems to be a long-time calving.' And there was a big storm on. And he said, 'Well, she can bloody well die.'
>
> Q: Oh.
>
> A: He wasn't going out in the storm. He's petrified of storms. And I laughed. I still laugh about that. I give him a rub about it.
>
> [Justine, current female dairy farmer]

However, some participants refused to discuss it at all while others removed it from the transcripts when they had the opportunity to do so (meaning that we are ethically unable to include those comments).

Among most of the men and some of the women who would discuss the issue of separating calves from cows, there was a general acceptance or inference that this was 'just part of the job' and that 'cows are adaptable' and 'get over it pretty quickly':

> Q: And how often, how long is it that you keep the calves with their mum?
>
> A: It depends. Usually at least 2 weeks. And then after that they will come down with me and be fed on the bottle. But if they're going to be in our replacement herd, so if they're part of the milking herd later in their life, then they would stay with their mum for 3 months, and then mum will come up to the yards and feed them morning and afternoon, and then we take what's left. So, the calf gets it and then we take whatever's left over, and we find that works better because mum licks

> them, she – they get all of that bonding type experience, and then they are better mothers I think when it's their turn to be a mum.
> [Caroline, current female dairy farmer].

Despite this tendency to assume traditional dairy farming practices were a 'normal and natural part of life', a couple of dairy farmers we talked with have been experimenting with leaving calves with their mothers for longer than a few hours or days. Most are doing so in recognition of the close bonds cows and calves can develop with each other. Yet, conventional dairy farming ordinarily involves separating calves from cows and for some farmers, farmer families and farm hands this can be an emotionally intense process.

Some of the women who married into dairy farming told us that it was a shock to their system witnessing some of the traditional dairy farming practices. Often these women were expected to abide by traditions that they disapproved of. Over time, however, a couple of them worked up the courage to persuade others, including their husbands, to institute different practices, including not sending bobby calves for slaughter within days of their birth and tail docking. Vanessa provided a good example:

> …then you marry a dairy farmer and then you're taking these calves to market every week. You're like, I really – like you talk about 'What do you love about farming? …I remember sitting there thinking, 'Oh I love farming, but I hate this' [separating calves from their mothers hours after birth], this is just so horrible. So, we started rearing them and we [still] used to sell them. Rear them to weaning, sort of 5-6 months. I remember thinking – well there's a few [other] practices in the dairying that I didn't like, like the calf induction, and the tail docking, and the calf – the bobby calves. [Vanessa, current female dairy farmer]

Many of the other farmers in our study, however, rationalised this separation and told us either that it wasn't problematic or that this is how it has always been done:

> Look sending away the bobby calves is not, it's not pleasant for anybody –…Yeah so, but it's just a way of, it's just how life is I think, you just have to be, being a dairy farmer, it's not a pretty job you know, it's very dirty work.
> [Sylvia, current female dairy farmer]

> Well because he, I gave him [bobby calf] a name – ah [it was a] silly thing to do because then we inherited Harriet, the lovely old black house cow and she had a calf a few months after we moved in. And he [one of Harriet's bobby calves] of course became very used to being handled. So, not only did I make the mistake of giving him [bobby calf] a name and becoming very attached to him, when he was, went off to the local calf sales, I [also] went down and watched it all happening which was, really, really hard to do. But I guess I became used to doing that after a while. I guess once we had a few more cows and then maybe sold, sent off a few little calves at the same time. Someone came and took them away and I didn't ever go to a calf sale and watch them being … and all of that, but that was very hard.
> [Rachel, retired 'dairy farmer's wife']

When asked about taking the bobby calves off their mothers, one farmer had this to say:

> Q: Do you get upset when you have to separate the boys from – ?
>
> A: Oh yeah absolutely. If anyone's ever been out in the paddock and when you're bringing the calves in from the mothers – the mothers aren't happy, of course, like humans, you know. [Sylvia, current female dairy farmer]

Recognition of the emotional impact of separating calves from cows motivated a small number of women farmers we interviewed to try alternative approaches. They reported facing resistance from within and a lack of support from within and without:

> And my hope – desire is that I'm going to have more farms – or demand for enough milk that all my girls that are being – come through my farming system, will end up dairy cows either with me or with some other woman, and they've never known

> cruelty. They've never known humans to think that they're something to be driven with a – an electric prodder or – they'll – they won't have that fear of humans. [Claire, current vegan female dairy farmer]

Killing Farmed Animals

Humans can experience great stress when having to kill animals whom they have cared for, which is why Reeve et al. referred to 'the caring-killing paradox'. One way to deal with this paradox is to detach from caring and compassion. In turn, though, this can lead to a normalisation of abusive practises aimed at farmed animals with Devitt et al. cautioning the need to understand on-farm animal abuse or neglect within a wider context of farmer stress.

Many of the people we interviewed indicated that witnessing calves and cows being sent for slaughter can be hard and most of the farmers indicated wrestling with their emotions when killing a sick or injured animal:

> Q: Do you have emotions when you have to shoot one of them?
>
> A: Oh, yeah. But you just got to get over it. That's part of farming that you've just sort of grown up with that you know that's got to happen. And that's same with – same with the dogs. Same with them that dogs – the dog comes to its age where it's too old and you think it's going to be uncomfortable and in pain. Just off – best off putting it out of its misery. It's no good and it kills you doing it, but it's best for everybody in the long run – same with the cows. [Roger, current male dairy farmer]

Resignation to the killing of animals sometimes came with ethical and moral dilemmas that farmers rationalised. Mary did this in relation to the slaughter of bobby calves:

> …people say oh well we shouldn't have this [dairy] industry – [But] you can't have all these bulls running around because you would have disastrous results. You would have in a happy world, you would keep every animal, but if you did that you would then have heifers that aren't ready to be joined – getting joined to bulls and then

> that's disastrous. I've seen heifers 12-15 months of age trying to calve. It's just like asking a 12-year-old girl to give birth to a baby. You know you can't do that? Unfortunately, it's a downside to the industry…
> [Mary, current female dairy farmer]

Farmer mental health and animal welfare

While there is much to criticise about the very existence of dairy farms (see e.g., Wicks), most research overlooks the links between farmer and cow health and wellbeing. Yet, in our study, this was something the farmers themselves were very aware of.

Many farmers we interviewed indicated that they felt emotionally connected with their cows and that this provided a source of happiness:

> I could feel the warmth… When you called the cows… Or sometimes I just had to go out with the blue bucket and they'd see me and come up… There's something really special about that and they, putting them in the old bales and they'd stand there, quite a long time until I learnt to milk at a better pace and just their warmth. They have a particular aroma coming from them. It's really warm and fuzzy and lovely … because they're really soft and often when you're sitting down there on a really low, little stool or box and your heads sort of is, it's almost sort of resting on their flank, so there's a really warm, warmness. There's a closeness and we did get very close to our cows. [Rachel, who referred to herself as a 'dairy famer's wife']

But they also noted that it could lead to stress and/or mental ill-health for them if their animals were unwell or if they needed to treat their animals in ways they did not particularly like in order to be economically viable. This usually expressed itself through farmers discussing the protective tactics they used when their animals were unwell. For example:

> No, I definitely shut down more. You know, you don't care as much, that's for sure. You can only do the best you can. You get your best, and you do this, and you do that. But at the end of the day, you can only, you can only do the best you can. [Jeremy, current male dairy farmer]

Concluding Remarks

Our aim in offering the above analysis is to acknowledge that the health and wellbeing of cows on dairy farms is intrinsically linked to that of the humans who work with them. While we would both like to see an end to dairy farming (and all forms of animal consumption), we acknowledge that this is unlikely to happen quickly, and interim measures are needed to improve animals' lives. And while we might prefer that any changes take place because of concern over the animals themselves, we think that any immediate constructive changes need to be in dialogue with farmers, with a recognition that humans are also harmed through farming practices. Bearing this in mind, we finish this paper with a brief consideration of some of the future avenues for change. In particular:

1. Encouraging dialogue between farmers and animal advocates about cruelty and kindness, and ascertaining when, where and how productive change can occur. Many dairy farmers we interviewed were concerned about farm animal cruelty and mistreatment and some were instituting alternative practices to improve animal welfare. Of these, there may be several willing to 'talk across the lines of difference'.
2. Continuing to reinforce kindness and the prevention of animal cruelty as core ethics, even if people define the terms in distinctly different ways. This focus helps to centre animals' interests and can serve as a platform through which different interpretations of kindness and cruelty are discussed.

3. Valuing women's leadership in dairy farming and animal advocacy and activism provides important pathways forward for possible dialogue. Gender roles and expectations still play a role in shaping women's (and men's) lives in Australia, and women are already playing significant leadership roles in both animal advocacy and dairy farming. In this study we found women were the most willing to speak to us and to consider our critical/provoking questions about their farming practices. It was also the women dairy farmers who were trying alternative animal-friendly practices including the one vegan dairy farmer we spoke to.
4. Acknowledging that major corporations and factory farming (further) threatens farmed animals' health and welfare includes concerns over the push for dairy farmers to increase the scale of their operations, and therefore the size of their herds. Again, this might offer a point of connection for animal advocates and dairy farmers who mostly agree that the intensification of farming threatens animal wellbeing.
5. Helping farmers and their animals transition out of dairy farming is the final recommendation of future possibilities. This support is important not just for the farmers but also for their animals, who rely on dairy farmers and their workers to provide for their survival. Examples of animal advocates and activists helping farmers who are closing down their farms relocate their animals to sanctuaries are emerging and could be supported even further.

Above all, we agree with Wicks that any changes to the dairy industry in Australia and beyond need to centre the cows, whose bodies have 'been turned into a disease-prone milking machine whose welfare is subsumed into the quest for economic advantage'. As she argues, the 'imaginary world' of happy cows inhabiting a harmless industry is slowly being demystified as we slowly become aware of the damage we have done.

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