

# Strengthening resilience of primary producers and farming communities

Justine Drew, Mary-Anne Young and Merri Tohill, Primary Industries and Regions South Australia

A community's capacity to lead its recovery depends on its collective resilience. How governments provide the right kind of support to primary producers to build that resilience is being assessed in South Australia.

Primary Industries and Regions South Australia (PIRSA) is a state government economic development agency that provides response, relief and recovery support to primary producers and industries in collaboration with other government agencies and non-government organisations. In events that significantly affect regional economies and wellbeing, PIRSA works with affected communities and industries to develop community-led recovery programs and support regional development opportunities.

PIRSA is flexible in its approach. Experience shows that working at various levels (individual, group, regional and industry) as part of a community-led approach is successful in achieving economic recovery. A community's capacity to lead its recovery depends on its collective resilience; the ability of individuals, communities and industries to absorb, respond to and recover from adversity and adapt to changed circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

We provide four case studies where the type and level of recovery assistance varied according to the needs of those affected. Community resilience is considered in terms of the human, social, financial, and political capital as outlined in the Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook.

## Pinery fire, November 2015

The Pinery fire burnt 85,000 hectares of agricultural land and destroyed 139 homes. Two people died and 31 were injured. Approximately 150 grain and livestock farmers were affected and a significant area of land was exposed to soil erosion. The Insurance Council of Australia declared the event as catastrophic with insurance claims of over \$172 million.

Most producers had some insurance. Donations of fodder were provided from farmers state-wide and many volunteers helped clean up debris and reinstate fences. Farmers collaborated to deal with soil erosion. PIRSA provided technical advice on soil erosion, assisted in coordinating fodder donations and distribution, administered National Disaster Assistance Scheme Recovery grants, facilitated connections between support agencies and organisations and primary

producers and participated in the local recovery committee.

The level of support required from PIRSA was considered moderate as most primary producers used their own social, physical and financial resources. The community was well-prepared for such an event and was well-connected through numerous networks.

## Gawler River flood, September 2016

In spring 2016, 5860 hectares of land in the Gawler River catchment flooded following a severe storm. Approximately 300 primary producers were affected. Extensive damage occurred to land, infrastructure and high-value horticultural crops at point of harvest, causing immediate financial hardship for many growers. The value of crops lost was estimated at \$51 million.

Most producers were unable to insure against such losses and they lacked financial resources to repair damage and replant. The event did not attract volunteers from outside the region, however, family members assisted with clean-up and restoration efforts on some properties. PIRSA support included flood water removal, coordinating a waste-removal program, providing technical advice on soil management, administering National Disaster Assistance Scheme Recovery grants and participating on the local recovery committee.

The level of support required from PIRSA in this case was very high due to the need for a recovery centre to provide face-to-face support and interpreter services to manage cultural, business and language needs. The flood water removal and waste removal were essential services that required intensive effort to support the recovery.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience 2018, *Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook*, Australian Government Department of Home Affairs.

## Riverland hail storm, November 2016

Hail and extreme winds moved through the Riverland region of South Australia, severely damaging or destroying grape, citrus and stone fruit crops as well as irrigation infrastructure. The total damage was estimated to be \$74 million.

Some producers had insurance or other risk management safeguards. The event did not attract volunteers from outside the region to assist with clean-up. Growers within commodity groups collaborated to manage damaged fruit for biosecurity purposes and alternate markets. PIRSA's support included administering National Disaster Assistance Scheme Recovery grants, coordinating clean-up of fallen fruit using labour from a local training centre, collaborating with industry groups to fund and coordinate mental health and financial counselling support workers and participating in the local recovery committee.

The level of support required from PIRSA was considered high due to the administration of grants and oversight of the clean-up and financial counselling services. This community has successfully withstood a number of adverse events in recent times and is well-connected through numerous networks.

## Sherwood fire, January 2018

A fire in the Sherwood district burnt 12,000 hectares of agricultural land on 19 properties, destroying two homes. Losses included 3000 animals, houses, sheds, machinery and fencing and land was exposed to soil erosion. The total estimated damage was \$7.1 million.

The local community provided support for immediate needs such as livestock welfare and locally donated fodder. Volunteers helped clean up debris and reinstate fences. Farmers collaborated to deal with soil erosion. PIRSA provided technical advice on soil and land management issues, participated in the local recovery committee and supported landholder liaison.

The level of support required from PIRSA was very low due to the preparedness and self-reliance of the community. This community has successfully withstood a number of adverse events in recent times and are well-connected through strong local networks.

## Building resilience

Previous approaches in South Australia have concentrated on developing the technical and business skills of farmers. These aspects remain a priority, however, key to building business and community resilience is developing the resilience of individuals.

Resilient individuals generally have characteristics of:

- caring and supportive relationships within and outside of family

- a capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out
- a positive view of themselves and confidence in their strengths and abilities
- skills in communication and problem-solving, and capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses.<sup>2</sup>

Including individual resilience development in a farm business program improves a producer's ability to implement plans. Developing the self-reliance of primary producers as well as independence and personal accountability increases their confidence in making sound decisions for their business, with less expectation on government and non-government organisations to 'fix' problems, provide financial assistance or provide compensation for hardship or inconvenience.

Caldwell and Boyd (2009)<sup>3</sup> looked at coping and resilience in farming families affected by drought and noted that: 'Providing financial assistance to support current community initiatives and collective coping strategies may prove more beneficial to farmers than allocating inadequate amounts of funding to individual farming families'.

Opportunities for PIRSA to build the resilience of primary producers, industries and communities include:

- increasing the viability and sustainability of primary production businesses by improving producers' skills and knowledge in managing and operating their businesses
- strengthening community and industry networks and leadership through involvement in planning, development and delivery of learning and development activities
- undertaking primary industry sector resilience profiling for better collective understanding of potential hazards, impacts and recovery needs
- promoting and including a personal resilience component in farm business skills development
- exploring the lessons from past recovery efforts to inform resilience-building programs.

The needs of primary producers and primary industries recovering from the four case study emergency events varied considerably and required different levels and types of support. A review of resilience characteristics of affected communities suggests that people in the more resilient communities were more strongly interconnected, more financially secure and more knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in managing their primary production businesses. As a result, PIRSA is considering how it can strengthen the resilience of primary producers and primary industries to maintain economic growth.

2 American Psychological Association 2018, *The Road to Resilience*. At: [www.apa.org/helpcenter/tpad-resilience.aspx](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/tpad-resilience.aspx).

3 Caldwell K & Boyd CP 2009, *Coping and resilience in farming families affected by drought*, *Rural and Remote Health* vol. 9, p. 1088.