



# Tackling the effects of Groundhog Day in farm ownership



Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme

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# 1. Executive summary

*“Groundhog Day (noun): A situation in which events are or appear to be continually repeated” (Collins dictionary)*

I grew up with a dog whistle around my neck, a handpiece in my hand and a knife and pouch around my waist. Farming was always going to be my journey. Yet after seventeen years of management and more recently ownership, I feel my passion for the day to day work dwindling.... I'm bored.

The daily chores on my 1000ha sheep and beef property at Porangahau in Hawke's Bay are no longer the challenge they once were, development on Senlac Station was predominantly done over 10 years ago, with fencing, water systems, metalling and an aggressive regrassing programme keeping my passion burning at the time. And while there is still plenty to do, I feel like the project that is Senlac Station is complete. But high debt levels, and an emotional attachment (that is only experienced once you have poured your heart and soul into a business) toward my property hinder the decision-making process and before long I find myself stuck in a rut, constantly looking over the fence for the stimulation I crave.

Initial research suggested I was not alone. I have many friends and acquaintances that themselves have made changes to their farm business just to combat the boredom in their daily lives. Some bought diggers and went contracting, some invested heavily into sheep and cattle studs, while others leased out the farm and joined the corporate world in search for more stimulation.

This report endeavours to:

- 1) Ascertain whether Groundhog Day is an issue for farm owners
- 2) If so, why is it an issue
- 3) What tools can be employed to deal with it and prepare for it.

Unfortunately, although the agriculture industry has overlooked boredom in farming as an issue, the corporate world sees boredom in entrepreneurs as a contributor to low productivity and stress leading to depression, yet the question is rarely asked in any farming sector. As a young person about to enter farm ownership, it would be beneficial to know that keeping the passion for farming alive is not as easy as it may seem and to have some tools in place to tackle the issue if and when it arises may make any transition much easier.

As not much has been written about boredom in farm ownership, I had to look at the corporate world for my literature review. Here articles regarding boredom in entrepreneurship could be directly related back to the farming sector. I also conducted a survey on social media which had 86 respondents and gave me the basis of my research. Meeting with leaders in the field of rural mental health highlighted the importance of exposing an issue not yet considered relevant.

Most wellbeing experts believe in the five ways to wellbeing. These are:

\***Connect** with family, friends, neighbours.

\***Give** to charities, donate your time.

**\*Take notice** of the little things.

**\*Keep learning** and developing.

**\*Be active** at work or in sport.

My survey also sought to find out how much time farmers set aside for these five behaviours and whether there were any correlations between these and those farmers that are struggling with the effect of Groundhog Day.

Out of the 86 people surveyed:

- 30% said they often felt stuck in a rut at work
- 42% reported that they felt stuck in a rut only sometimes
- 28% stated that they did not feel they were stuck in a rut.

This backed up my initial hypothesis that Groundhog Day is an issue to some extent for 72% of farm owners, and a key contributor to low productivity and stress for 30% of farm owners.

The main causes appear to be monotony of routine, long hours/hard work, and profit/debt. And other reasons such as weather, inability to progress, compliance, and staff issues having a lesser impact but still worth noting.

Other interesting trends include:

1. Farm owners that are not affected by boredom tend to have other paid jobs outside of their core farm business (e.g. Council/board work), showing they have realised they require more stimulation than what the farm can offer.
2. Farmers that have been managing/owning for more than ten years are more affected by Groundhog Day showing that the longer you're farming the bigger an issue this is.
3. Farmers that are unaffected by Groundhog Day are much better at utilising the five behaviours to wellness.

There are many tools available outside of the five behaviours of wellness, most of which I shall detail in the report. These include:

- Take time off
- Create the role you want within your business
- Invest in yourself
- Have a strategic plan
- Notice the envy in others
- See the art in your work

Groundhog Day, boredom, seven-year itch, lack of passion - however you choose to describe it, can be an issue for any business owner. The difference with farming is that often there is millions of dollars tied up in property, stock, and plant, not to mention the sentimental value that can go with owning property, especially if it has been in the family for generations. Also, we normally live on the property, meaning the pressures of business are with you 24/7.

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## 4. Introduction

*“If you feel that there is a lot of work, but it’s not sufficiently challenging, or there’s no room for growth in your current position... you’re bored” (Joni Holderman, 2015)*

Farming is not for the faint hearted, whether it be dairy, sheep and beef, cropping or orcharding, farmers work hard to achieve the desired results. Sure, we are all motivated by different drivers, but one thing is a given; you have a devotion to your land, stock and plant that is seven days a week, sacrificing the lifestyle that our urban cousins have for one which is truly embedded in us. Our salaries are not set, often striving for just a positive result, yet we are being regulated by bureaucrats that often have no idea how farmers tick. Basically, we are over worked, underpaid, over regulated and undervalued. But here’s the thing: farmers love what they do. We aren’t afraid of the long hours, the constant tie to the property, or the fact that returns are often not high. We love the people in the industry and we love the fact that our families are a big part of our day to day lives and our kids can be brought up learning life lessons that cannot be installed in the city. We love the fact that we are our own boss and can do the hours we want knowing full well that 40 hours just won’t cut it. We love the fact that the daily commute takes 1 minute to the bike shed but we understand that living on the property also means we can never really remove ourselves from the business and the pressures that go with it.

Farmers are proud people, they are proud of the stock they produce, and they are proud of the land they farm. This sense of pride creates a bond to their land and their stock. The farm is often their baby, and in some cases is put ahead of family. This is something the urban world often doesn’t see. We love our land dearly and because we’re dealing with living animals, the willingness to go over and beyond the call of duty to protect them is embedded in the mindset of all farmers. The recent outbreak of Mycoplasma bovis with scenes on TV of farmers breaking down at the sight of their stock being sent to slaughter, should be a wake-up call to the anti-farming community to understand that it’s not all about the money. In fact, most farmers are not in it for the money. With 3-year average returns from sheep and beef at about 1% return on assets (Beef and Lamb benchmarking tool, 2018), and 5.7% return on assets in dairy over a 5-year period (Dairy NZ economic survey 2016/17), it’s not a get rich quick scheme. This is a big part of the reason why making big decisions on farm is so hard. There is a strong tie to the land, which is not easily broken.

The early stages of farm ownership are exciting. Young vibrant men and woman with a passion and energy to develop a property their way, to set policies that reflect their values, and make the most of the opportunity to gain respect amongst peers and community.

In time, this incredible devotion, bordering on obsession, takes its toll. The farm development has been completed, the stock policy is set, and staff are happy. They should be enjoying the fruits of their labour, and loving life. But many of us aren’t. Many farm owners that have given so much are bored, the day to day chores that were once so exciting are now just another job. They reluctantly get out of bed in the morning to go and do work that is no longer a challenge, yearning for another project that requires energy and passion to satisfy their need for stimulation.

## 5. Methodology

My research had three main components

1) Literature review

2) Survey

3) Phone and email interviews

1) As the issue of boredom in farm ownership is not one that is discussed let alone written about, I had to reach into the corporate world to find articles on boredom in entrepreneurship which could be directly related back to farm ownership as the two have many similarities. Both farmers and entrepreneurs are innovative, take calculated risks and have a lot invested in their business. They understand the need for hard work and are willing to make sacrifices to get their business going. By researching articles related to my topic I was hoping to get a basic understanding of how boredom impacts the mind of farmers/business owners. It was intended to give me an insight into questions that were required in the survey that would provide me with the answers that I needed.

2) The survey was conducted through survey monkey and posted on three Facebook pages

- NZ farming (145,000 followers)
- NZ farming mums (10,000 followers)
- My own Facebook page (480 followers)

I had 86 respondents from the survey with 47% sheep and beef, 43% dairy, 5% horticulture and 5% other (which may include forestry, or any other types of farm).

The survey had 16 questions, took an average of 7:44 minutes to complete and was posted at 5pm in the evening to catch people at home with the time to do it. By posting it on NZ Farming & NZ Farming Mums I was able to target a broad spectrum of farmers, and not just my contemporaries.

Another thing to note was that the survey was conducted in a year where sheep, deer and horticulture were seeing record profits, with beef and dairy not far behind. Also, across the country grass was abundant and it was a great time to be farming in NZ. The survey was posted in the middle of April, a reasonably quiet time for dairy and sheep and beef farmers but potentially busy for those in horticulture.

3) Phone and face to face interviews gave some interesting theories of Groundhog Day in agriculture, but as it's a question that is not generally being asked of farmers, it didn't give much concrete evidence as to whether farmers are suffering from it. This was an underlying factor for me reporting on this topic as it really was an opportunity to uncover an issue in farming that is not yet being discussed.



## 6. Literature review

*“In the early stages of a new company, especially a homebased business where the owner is challenged by working in a new environment as well as by running a business, motivation is drawn from the desire to succeed long term. But once relative success has been achieved, the challenge to succeed often fades and people long for more excitement in their businesses. Even if you’re more successful than you ever imagined, a lack of motivation, and even boredom, can still strike” (Jim Rohrbach, 2000)*

### 6.1 Boredom of success

*“Most people forget that riveting success is preceded by routine boredom” (Stephen Blandino, 2011)*

So, what does success in farming look like? For some, it’s their name on silverware, others like to come home in the evening to their loving family happy in the knowledge that they have completed a solid day’s work, and for others it’s about the reputation gained among peers and community. Whatever your reasons for success, it is not obtainable without a lot of hard work, much of which in farming is monotonous, mind numbing work. Using the sheep and beef industry as an example, jobs such as docking can take weeks after which the sight of one more lamb is one too many, drenching/vaccinating can be days on your own bent over sheep, and tractor work is long days in small cabins on your own going around and around. In the dairy industry, it’s the cowshed where things can become monotonous.

*“Before success ever shows up, there are days, weeks, months, and even years of disciplined, step by step, methodical, vanilla, bland routines. These boring routines are the seeds of success. Without them success isn’t even possible. And regardless of your profession, every dream has its boring routines.*

*That’s the boredom of success but it’s worth it. It makes the success sweeter, much more appreciated, and helps us develop the character necessary to sustain success. And the moment we ignore the boredom of success, we undermine the future of success. Boredom is part of the journey.*

*Sometimes boredom is truly boring. But most times boredom is nothing more than the perseverance side of the journey. It’s the price tag, the blood, sweat, and tears”. So, the next time you see success standing in the limelight, take a moment and put things in perspective. A long, hard, road of day-by-day disciplined routines preceded that victory. That’s the boredom of success.*

**Questions: What are the boring routines necessary to experience success in your life? Are you embracing them? Have you given up? What do you need to do to get back on track?**

*(Blandino, 2011)*

## 6.2 Five ways to wellbeing

Leaders in mental health agree with the principles of the 'five ways to wellbeing'. This was a report written by NEF (The New Economics Foundation) for the UK government back in 2008 and drew on state of the art research from across the world providing a toolkit for those with mental health issues. It has become the most popular tool in the toolbox for issues surrounding mental health and one that is highly regarded among psychology experts. Below is an extract from the mental health foundation website:



### **Give**

*Giving is more than just the sharing of material things with others. It is about cultivating a spirit of generosity and promoting active participation in social and community life. Volunteering and community involvement has been strongly linked with positive feelings and functioning. Helping others, sharing one's skills and resources, and behaviours that promote a sense of purpose and team orientation have been found to help increase self-worth and produce a positive emotional effect. Giving is important for all age groups. It helps develop strong social cognition in children, a sense of purpose and self-worth in adults and particularly older people who have left the workforce and have time to offer.*

### **Be active**

*Do what you can. Enjoy what you do. Move your mood. Research shows a strong correlation between physical activity and increased wellbeing, as well as lower rates of depression and anxiety. It is now viewed as essential for people of all ages and has been shown to slow age-related cognitive decline. Evidence suggests that physical activity can increase self-belief, the ability to cope with difficult situations and provide a sense of mastery. It can also have the benefit of encouraging social interactions. Physical activity does not need to be particularly energetic to be of benefit. Moderate exertion three to five times a week can significantly reduce symptoms of depression, but improvements can also be seen from single bouts of exercise of less than 10 minutes.*

### **Keep learning**

*Embrace new experiences. See opportunities. Surprise yourself. Learning, remaining curious and setting goals is important for all ages. For children, it leads to positive cognitive and social development, while for adults it can lead to improvements in self-esteem, social interaction and a more active and involved life. It has also been shown to be effective in preventing depression in later years. Adult learning in particular includes elements of goal-setting, which is strongly associated with higher levels of wellbeing. This is particularly true when goals are self-generated, positively focused and align with personal values. Learning is more than just an activity for formal education. It can include any approaches to maintaining curiosity and an enquiring mind.*

### **Take notice**

*Appreciate the little things. Savour the moment. Developing skills that increase awareness of what is immediately happening – both physically and mentally, within and around us – can improve wellbeing. Even short courses teaching simple techniques can enhance wellbeing for several years. Much research has been done on mindfulness, which has been shown to have positive effects that include heightened self-knowledge. It suggests that an open awareness is particularly valuable for choosing behaviours that are consistent with one's needs, values and interests. Alignment to one's values is also an effective way to ensure that behaviour change becomes embedded over time. Specific approaches that have been shown to enhance wellbeing include gratitude, forgiveness, reflection and the development of meaning.*

### **Connect**

*Talk and listen. Be there. Feel connected. Feeling close to other people and valued by them is a fundamental human need. Across all ages, relationships and participation in a social life are critical for mental wellbeing and effective buffers against mental disorder. Strong social relationships are supportive, encouraging, and meaningful, and a wider social network is also important for feelings of connectedness and self-worth. The key message of Connect is that giving time and space to both strengthen and broaden social networks is important for wellbeing. The wellbeing of individuals is bound up in the wellbeing of their communities, so actions that focus solely on individual, inward-looking benefits will not be as effective as those that stress the importance of fostering.*

*The Five Ways Of Wellbeing was introduced to New Zealand in 2009 as part of Mental Health awareness week and aims to develop confidence in organisations and workers that their communication of the messages is supported by best practise, built upon good understanding of the evidence and reflects a consistent national approach.*

*The mental health foundation believes one of the key aims of a democratic government is to promote a good life: a flourishing society where citizens are happy, healthy, capable, and engaged. In other words, a society where people have high levels of wellbeing.*

*Recent years have seen a shift away from illness alone, to more attention on wellness, both in policy and health practise. (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand)*

### 6.3 The seven-year itch

*Is your entrepreneurial fire still burning? Still feeling the same spirit as you did when you first launched your business? Many businesses suffer motivational challenges after five to seven years, once the start-up passions have subsided and the business becomes, well, just business.*

*Answer the following questions to see if you're facing motivational lapses:*

- *Are you unhappy with work or do you dislike what you're doing, even when you're busy and making money?*
- ☐ *Are you unfocused? Do you dread the coming day when you awaken in the morning?*
- ☐ *Are you abrupt with people-family, peers, clients, or vendors? Are you inexplicably on edge with others? Do you have unexplained feeling of anxiety?*
- ☐ *Has your productivity taken a nosedive? Does your to-do list never get any smaller? Are you facing the same unfinished projects as you did last week?*
- ☐ *Have you considered the prospect of taking a full-time job where you do nothing more than your core task and you don't have to handle business development or the finances?*

*( Zbar, 2000)*

## 7. Results and recommendations

### Results

#### 7.1 Is Groundhog Day in farm ownership an issue?

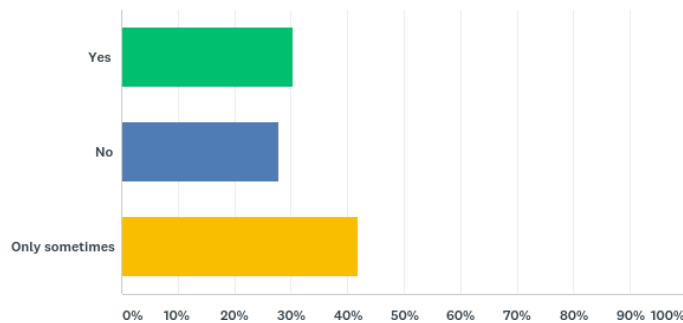
The only way to answer this question was through a survey, as the discussion regarding this topic is not being had in farming circles.

Out of the 86 people surveyed

- ☐ 30% said they often felt stuck in a rut at work,
- ☐ 42% only sometimes,
- ☐ 28% not being stuck in a rut at all.

This backed up my initial research that Groundhog Day is an issue to some extent for 72% of farmers, and a key contributor to low productivity and stress for 30% of farmers.

### Q3 Do you often feel stuck in a rut, sick of the day to day jobs?



As it's hard to quantify the term 'often', it's difficult to get a bearing on just how bad the issue is. But the results certainly give reason for the discussion to be had with farm owners.

Ian Handcock from Fit4farming had an interesting perspective:

*It depends on the person really but having Groundhog Day can actually be a benefit if it is used wisely. Having the brain and body wired to do the same chore 'mechanically' can make the job easy as it requires less brain power to think about the task ahead and the muscles are tuned in to the stresses of the job. This, for instance, allows the person to have chaos during times between milking's and when milking comes around again the mind flicks back into auto pilot and relaxes. I remember having my best innovations dreamed up during milking's. Some people might regard milking as a sort of meditation (the best sports players do most things on auto pilot because they train themselves to do things instinctively which allows them to think about the small percentiles that win matches or races)*

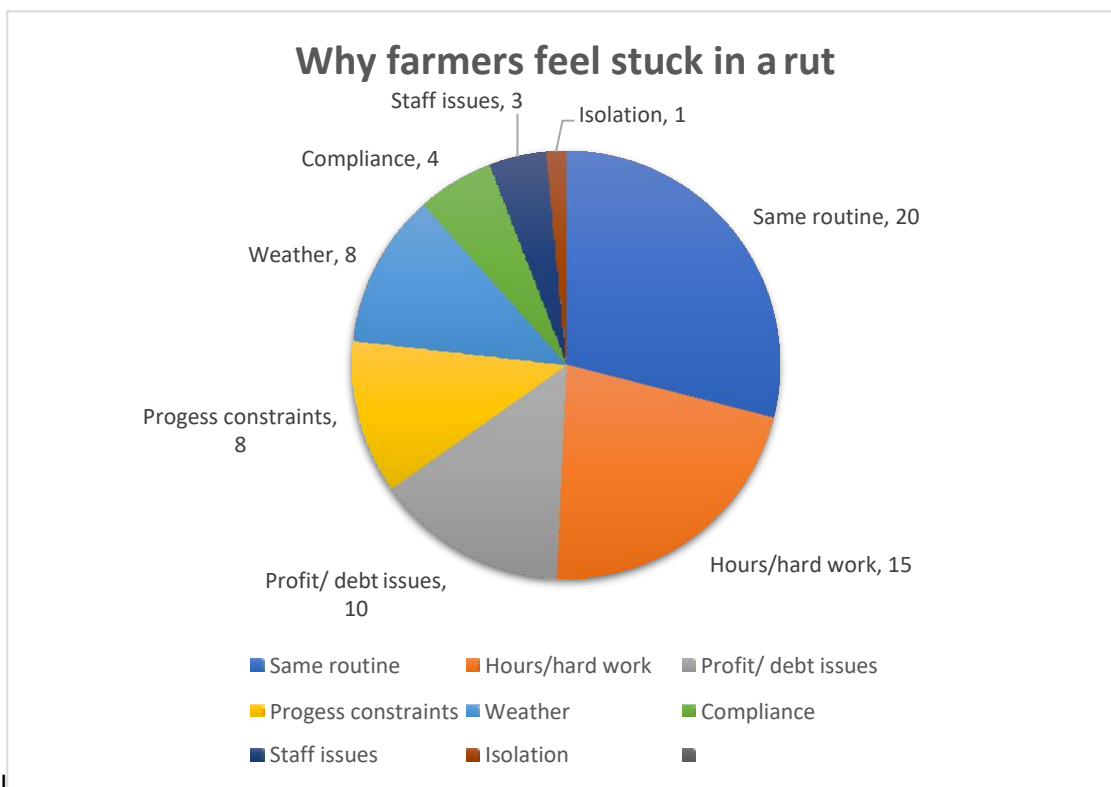
*Where it can become unstuck is when chaos happens to upset the routine such as finding a mastitis cow or lame cow during milking and having to deal with her for the next week or a flat tyre on the tractor while feeding, birdsnesting (of) the reel and so forth. Suddenly the Groundhog routine is upset, and farmers get angry and that can ruin the rest of their and their staff/family's day. The more chaos you have the better you get to deal with it. Some personalities enjoy chaos others cannot deal with it at all. (Ian Handcock, Fit4farming)*

## 7.2 Why is Groundhog Day an issue for farm owners?

My literature review had some answers to this question based on the corporate world, but my survey went into more detail and was specific to farm ownership

The survey gave some sound evidence of reasons why people feel stuck in a rut. 51 farmers stated their reasons in the survey.

Below is a graph of reasons given with number of farmers affected (many farmers citing several reasons).



Some of their rationale are quoted below:

- *“Problem after problem, paperwork and you always need a certified person to do it and costing thousands. Can see coming out with nothing when we sell, after spending years of hard work”.*
- *“Feel like you're constantly chasing your tail fixing things and not actually achieving anything”.*
- *“Repetitive jobs, cattle breaks and crops etc, 7 days a week with no staff to share load. Bad weather doesn't help.”*
- *“The seasons just keep rolling around like a hamster wheel. Same old thing just another day”.*
- *“Same old, same old every day, season by season. Results from changes can often take a long time to measure - weeks months, seasons, years. Then the climate kicks in and buggars everything up and you're back to square one or worse in negative territory.”*
- *“If you had another career, rather than being so heavily invested in farming you could change your pathways if you felt the need whereas now I feel we couldn't get out even if we wanted.”*
- *“Repetition, spinal problems, depression, compliance irritation from Fonterra. Questioning the ethics of farming. Feeling sad about culling loyal cows at the end of their usefulness. Public perception that farmers destroying the environment.”*
- *“(I) Don't feel stuck as always have a next step goal to work towards and break away to look forward to.”*
- *“Because payout has been low and we are trying to make every dollar count, we try to do as much as we can ourselves and save on labour costs. We milk every day and do all the general day to day jobs during the day, then try and squeeze in business planning and other jobs around this. It's so tiring doing the same thing in day out.”*

- *“Since becoming self-employed all I do is work. I used to travel the world but now all I do is work in my business.”*
- *“I was (bored) so I left the industry. Got sick of all of the external pressures with compliance and lack of family time.”*
- *“You farm the same year 30 times”*

Other key trends were:

1. **There was a strong result with those farmers who were most active across the five ways to wellbeing being the least likely to be stuck in a rut.**
2. **The longer you farm the more likely you are to be affected. Farmers stuck in a rut had been farming for average 13.2 years compared to 11.5 years for those not stuck in a rut.**
3. **Farmers that had other paid jobs outside of their day to day work on farm were noticeably less likely to be stuck in a rut. 71% of farmers ‘not bored’ had other paid jobs, whereas only 41% of those who said they were bored had other jobs.**
4. **41% of dairy farmers were stuck in a rut compared to 23% of sheep and beef farmers.**
5. **No one used lack of direction/strategic plan as their reason for being stuck in a rut, yet I feel that if we asked this question specifically, many would agree that this has an impact.**

## Recommendations

### 7.3 What tools can be implemented to deal with and prepare for Groundhog Day?

So how to keep the passion burning after years, and in some cases decades of hard, highly pressured, and often lowly paid work? The evidence shows there is a clear issue amongst the farming community where Groundhog Day is having a significant effect. More research is required to ascertain the real scale of the issue, but this report has lifted the lid on a problem that many farmers are facing day to day.

My research gave me an insight into not only why it is an issue but also some tools that can help to either reignite the passion (the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff), or even better to ensure that Groundhog Day never gets a grip on our weary minds (the fence at the top).

The five ways to wellbeing should be at the forefront of everyone’s minds with regards to mental health, and I have added some behaviours that would be of benefit, some of which mirror the five ways to wellbeing.

### **\*Take time off**

This is obvious. There is no better way to recharge the batteries than to get away from it all for a decent length of time. According to the University of Tampere in Finland, the ideal vacation length is 7-11 days (Bradley Johnston, 2017). This is according to psychologists at the university who suggested that 7-11 days was enough time to totally unwind and enjoy the trip to the fullest. Ideally taking a vacation at a quiet time of the year is best but not essential. The key to enjoying your holiday is having someone back home that is capable, reliable, and well enough informed to handle whatever is thrown their way in your absence. So that you can just get on with your much deserved relax time. A decent overseas holiday with your spouse will cost you about 2-3 finished cattle beasts which in the scheme of things is a small price to pay for a decent midwinter break to get your headspace right before lambing or calving.



### **\*Discuss the issue with your spouse, friends or mentors**

I found when I was struggling with the day to day work, that I assumed it was just me that had the issue, but only when I started talking to friends and others in the industry did I realise that I'm not alone. Like all mental health issues, a problem shared is a problem halved. Connecting with others is a big part of positive mental health and often showing a little vulnerability is a great way to strengthen relationships.

### **\*Beware the pub talk**

Often in farming we tend to compare ourselves to our friends or neighbours, creating a competition amongst all the chaos that is farming. We compare lambing percentages, weaning weights, and crop yields, sometimes even financial stats. Farmers, like all people, are very good at only telling you what they want you to hear, choosing not to share the parts of the story that may not present them in a very good light quiet. At the end of the day, we are all motivated by different drivers, and getting down on ourselves because our neighbour has a better scanning percentage is not worth the stress.

### **\*Set goals**

Setting goals is a great way to keep your eye on the bigger prize. Short term goals are easier to achieve as perseverance is not the issue. Long term goal setting or strategic planning help you find the 'why' in your business and assist with succession. They require significant perseverance. When you're in the cowshed for the tenth day straight, sometimes it's good to reflect on why you're willing to do this. As previously mentioned sometimes the boredom is the price tag, the blood sweat and tears part of the journey toward success.

*When setting goals in a regimented system like farming you need to set a number of goals in different areas including personal and family and set short timeframes. This is because it is difficult to win at anything, so we don't experience a sensation of achievement because the seasons roll into one another (Groundhog Day) so we wait until the end production to see if we failed or succeeded.*



*Setting short term goals during the season helps break the Groundhog Day up, encourages so (sic) but still allows the routine of the job to occur (Ian Handcock, Fit4farming)*

### **\*Create the role you want within your business**

When you first go farming, every part of the job is interesting and challenging. After a while the challenge is not so big, and you discover what it is you really enjoy and really don't enjoy. It is critical that you are doing the jobs you love and delegating the rest to someone else. Choose a job you love, and you'll never work another day in your life.

### **\*Create a new project**

Sometimes removing yourself from the day to day running of the property either part time or full time, can open up a new world of enthusiasm. By starting a new project, it allows you to re-energize your focus and revive your pioneering spirit. It can be something small like a farm environment plan or a new set of cattle yards, or it can be big like installing an irrigation system or buying the block next door. It may not even be directly related to your current business, such as property development, or becoming an angel investor. But whatever you choose, make sure it's something that you are passionate about. It goes a long way toward solving the boredom issue.

### **\*Start each day well**

Start the day with positive thoughts and a series of positive questions. What will excite me today? What am I looking forward to? Throw in a little exercise (if you have time) as this is a great way to not only feel good about yourself, but also a great opportunity to plan for the day ahead. Being organised gives you a feeling of being on top of your game. And eat a healthy breakfast.



### **\*Invest in yourself**

The Kellogg programme for me was the game changer I needed. It took me well out of my comfort zone, it was the first part of a personal development journey necessary to give me the confidence and direction I required. Finding a mentor/business coach, having a commitment to constantly learn, and knowing your emotional limits, are ways to ensure that you always stay on top. As they say, "if you want to invest in something with minimum risk and guaranteed big return, invest in yourself" (Boss Babe).

### **\*Look after staff and they will look after you**

For some, staff are the necessary evil, for others, the most important cog in the wheel. Get it right and the rewards are huge, get it wrong, and you feel like a prisoner on your own farm. Creating a solid team culture, where staff feel empowered and appreciated has far reaching benefits. Better

productivity, better efficiencies, and most importantly, a happy workplace environment can have a huge impact on both parties' wellbeing. Knowing that your property is in safe, reliable hands while you're away gives you the freedom to take time off, create a new project, and invest in yourself, thus making them the most important cog in the wheel. This doesn't only apply to staff but all people that you deal with day to day.

### **\*Challenges versus resources**

No matter what type of farming you are doing, challenges present themselves every day. Anything from trying to get stubborn ram lambs through a wet gateway, to deciding whether you have the feed to buy \$100,000 worth of stock. If the resources are not available to meet the many challenges on farm, then the to-do list can snowball very quickly and soon you become bogged down, feeling that you cannot get ahead. Often appropriate use of casual staff/contractors is the resource that is limited, as farmers are well known for our no.8 wire approach and we try and do everything ourselves, often to the detriment of the whole farm system.

### **\*See the art in your work**

Whether you are working a heading dog, building a fence, or shearing a sheep, we are generally looking to be as perfect as can be. So much of what we do on farm can be likened to art. There is an art in getting your heading dog to do what you want, there is an art in getting a sheep to sit still while shearing, and there is an art getting those plough lines straight. As it's our everyday, we don't perceive it as art but to others it absolutely is. Taking the extra time to do a job that we can be proud of no matter how big or small can pay big dividends to your mental state. It's time we stood back and realised what amazing artists we are.

### **\*Notice the envy of others**

Next time your neighbour says, "I'm off to Bali next week" and you reply, "Oh lucky for some", or, "can I carry your bags" notice what you are saying. Ask yourself, 'why aren't I doing this'? Because more often than not you could go if you wanted to. True envy when you currently can't have what they have is a positive emotion as it is often what drives us to succeed. This is different from just feeling envious. For some reason in farming we tend to not do the things we want. Is it out of fear for being 'that guy that's always away', or that guy that spends too much, or do we just not want the hassle of having to organize everything beforehand?

### **\*Reassess your calling**

There are many reasons why we decide to go farming. For some of us that grew up on a farm it feels like it's engrained in us, for others the raw desire to work with animals made it an obvious choice, and for some they came home to help dad on the farm and just never really left. Whatever your reasons, it's always a healthy process to review where you're at in life and ask yourself those difficult questions. Often there is family involved so it pays to bring a third party in as any big decisions require a lot of thought and soul searching. At the end of the day we only live once and getting to age 65 and looking back wishing you hadn't spent your one and only working life doing what you did

is not the outcome you desire. Big changes are probably best as a staged process.... try before you buy.

Below are some of the comments from the survey that gave me an insight into how some farmers have tackled the effect of Groundhog Day:

*"Through feeling like this we have taken steps to work off farm and spend more time away. We have good staff that lets us do this but still feel that farming can be mundane if you let it. We try and change things to keep it interesting. And don't forget just because you're the land owner doesn't mean you have to work in it 24/7."*

*"If you don't get the results you want, keep trying and changing/working at things until you do. Family and "off farm days" are very important. And ask for help/advise - talk to people - seek help if you are feeling down or out of sorts."*

*"You can make heaven into hell if you want but it is not impossible to change jobs or job description in this industry to keep you interested."*

*"I sold (the) farm and retired. I found that I could not overcome depression and suicidal thoughts. Life is now a lot more enjoyable, no more anxiety attacks. I miss the cows."*

*"I think it's important to concentrate on the areas of the business that you enjoy and don't be hesitant to get help for the parts of the business you least enjoy. If the you have the ability to make changes to the business to enable you to focus on your strengths, then the ownership of the farm business won't be seen as a chore."*

*"Change is always scary, having the ability to change or go against the grain in farming is true courage."*

*"Live every day as if it's your last, put your family and life experience first. It may cost you 10% production but it's worth it."*

*"I've done it and it was a massive step. Found that there are so many opportunities out there and still in the Agri industry. Just have a life now and get paid better."*

*"This is a real issue, there is always options to do things differently, but farmers need to be open minded to change."*

*"Time to change the image of farming to make it a CEO role."*

*"Yes, (I) definitely think it's an issue. I think people that like challenges and change will have a greater issue than those that prefer security. I sometimes have the feeling of being trapped. It's because you are responsible for something greater than just yourself and it is 24/7."*

*"While it is more difficult to exit there are perhaps greater opportunities to maintain your own business and work elsewhere in the industry or community. The key is maintaining financial viability to achieve that goal. Marginal viability locks you in and reduces off farm opportunities. Equally taking on too much can lead to burnout. Finding the right balance seems to be critical in maintaining enthusiasm."*

*"I think farmers do not value self-improvement enough (i.e. understanding themselves and how they interact with others) and yet this is the one thing that could improve their lives the most."*

*“Hasn't really being an issue for me as I diversified my role after about 10 years. However, I have seen it affect many around me along the way. It normally takes a change of something to see people get the passion back whatever it may be.”*

*“I think that it is a big and changing world out there and we will see how farmers run and manage their operations change in the future. Gone are the days where you spend most of your working career on the farm. More farmers are tending to be broadminded and looking outside the square whether it is within their business or outside of it.”*

## **8. Next steps**

### **8.1 Link to depression**

According to my literature review, boredom is a form of stress, and chronic stress can lead to depression in susceptible people. Whether this is the case with farm owners requires more research, and with the high incidence of depression amongst farmers in the 42-55 yr. age bracket (Doug Avery), one would assume that it has a part to play.

*Boredom is often cited as symptom of depression but may also be a trigger. A study published online in PLoS One (Public Library of Science) linked long hours and job strain to depression. Experts highlight that a predictable and unchallenging work environment is one of the key factors of job stress, which can pour over to your personal life and lead to the blues (Reid, 2012)*

*The notion of "Groundhog Day" may be a factor contributing to burn out/depression but conversely can also be a symptom of burn out/depression. For some people the repetitive nature of tasks over time often with long intensive hours and the ongoing challenges of farming (particularly if they feel they are not getting ahead or have no other choices) can bring on depression/burnout. But also, people often lose their passion, energy and motivation for farming when they are suffering from depression/burnout and when this resolves the passion and enjoyment for farming has the potential to return. (Sarah Donaldson, East Coast Rural Support Trust)*

### **8.2 Link to farm performance**

Your daily work has become a grind, a reluctant one at best, but does this impact on farm performance? For a farmer to be in the top 40%, passion is essential. So once that passion fades, is it possible to still hang on to strong productivity? As farm owners get older, their financial performance drops. This is due to motivation and being in a stronger financial position so their focus shifts from profit to enjoyment. This question of linking Groundhog Day to farm performance is not asked nor answered in this report but looking at what drives the bottom 40% of farmers, loss of passion is significant and suggests it's worth the investigation.

*Yes, I see 'Groundhog Day' often. Sometimes it is for a short time (1 or 2 weeks) but more often it is longer. If it is longer it often has a negative impact on performance as farmers put off jobs etc.*

*(John Tatere, Rabobank)*

### **8.3 Introvert vs Extrovert**

One thing that my research did not cover was the difference in personality types affected by Groundhog Day. One would assume that an extroverted personality which requires constant external stimulation would be worse affected than that of an introverted personality, but this has not been touched on in this report.

### **8.4 Little more required**

This research was intended to get some answers to my three study questions:

- 1) Is Groundhog Day an issue for farm owners?
- 2) If so why?
- 3) What tools can be implemented?

Whilst the report has given a basic understanding of the issues around Groundhog Day, it is only touching the surface of an issue which is potentially having a serious impact on the psychology of our farmers, and therefore farm performance. Further action is required to ascertain the true scale of the issue. Farmer council members often talk about the difficulty getting the bottom 40% of farmers along to field days/workshops etc. Is Groundhog Day a big part of the reason why?

## 9. Conclusion

Farmers, the backbone of the economy, hardworking down to earth people passionate about making the world a better place. We are caretakers for our land, doggedly trying to leave our small area of paradise better than when we took it over. We are optimistic (you must be to survive in this environment) about what the future holds for our kids and grandkids, and sleep soundly in the knowledge that the world is a better place with farmers in it.

Yet, with all this confidence, our passions are dwindling and we're struggling to keep our mental health in good condition. Depression is rife among the farming community and financial problems and long arduous hours have been to blame. But there is another issue constantly poking farmers in the ribs.... a feeling of being trapped by boredom. A feeling that once the farm is set up and ticking over, where is the challenge now? Sure, farming is always a challenge, but many of us need new projects and variety to fill our challenge void, and where are the projects? Is this the underlying problem which is the reason why the long hours appear so arduous? And how easy is it to make sound financial decisions when one has lost passion for his/her business?

This report set out to learn more about the impact that Groundhog Day is having on the farming community. There is strong evidence that farmers are being affected, opening up an opportunity for leaders in rural mental health to examine further. The reasons why farmers are affected are clearly outlined in chapter seven. I have also included a number of tools that can be employed to tackle the effects of Groundhog Day in farm ownership.

I challenge farmers to ask themselves these questions, and I challenge all in the Agriculture industry to ask farmers these questions, because at the end of the day "A life without passion is not living, it is merely existing" (Leo Buscaglia).

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# 11. Appendices

## 11. Appendix 1: Survey

Tackling the effects of Groundhog Day in farm ownership

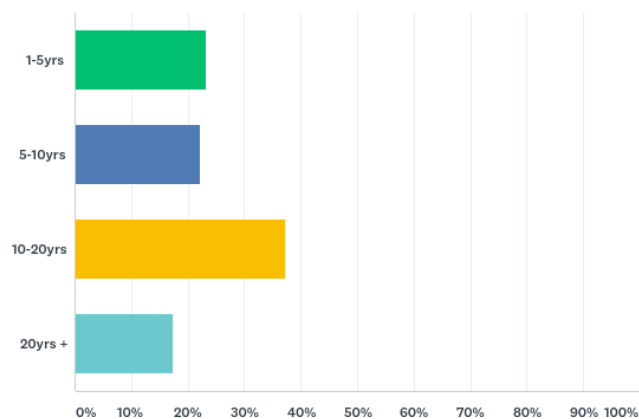
Total responses 86

Average completion rate 100%

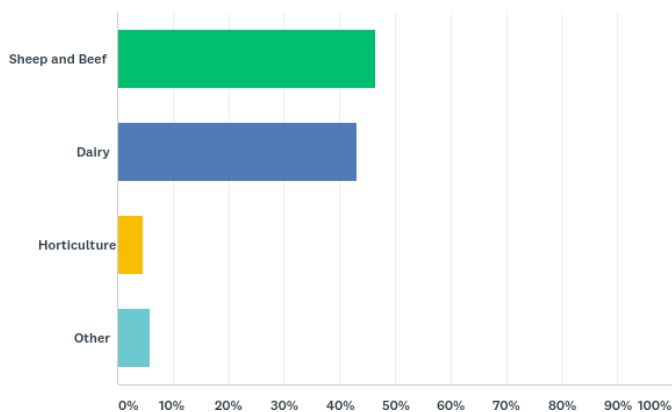
Typical time spent 00h:07m:44s

*I haven't included all personal responses as some have confidential information and this was a confidential survey, instead choosing to handpick a few responses in the report which were pertinent to the survey and held no confidential information*

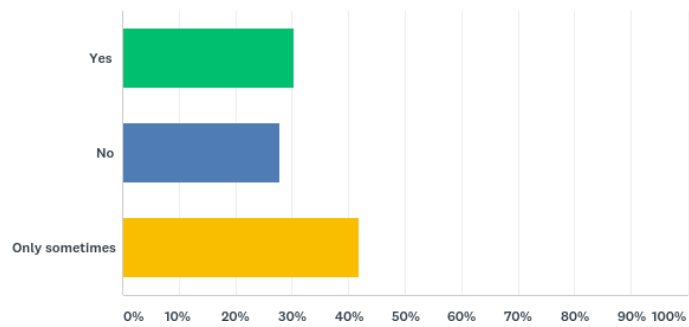
Q1 How long have you owned/managed your business?



Q2 What industry are you in?



Q3 Do you often feel stuck in a rut, sick of the day to day jobs?

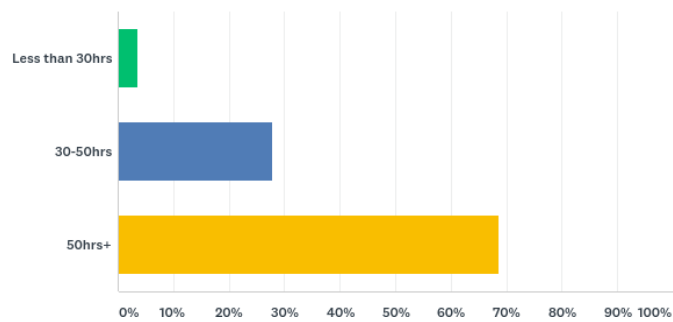


Q4

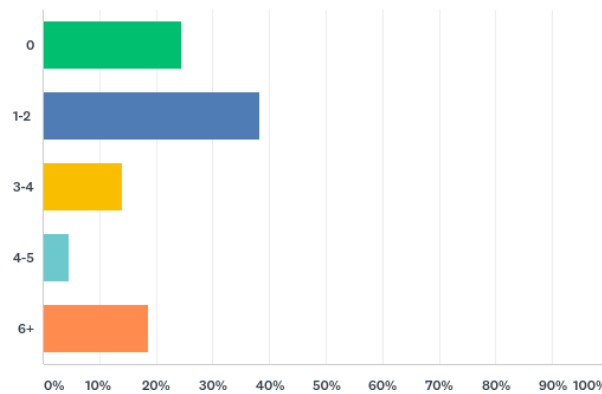
If so, please comment why you feel stuck in a rut?

- Answered: 57
- Skipped: 29

Q5 How many hours do you work per week?



Q6 How many staff do you employ?



Q7

What other paid work outside of your core business occupy your week, if any? (include work with boards/councils, contracting)

- Answered: 68
- Skipped: 18

Q8

What part of your operation are you most proud of and why? E.g.: Profit, tidiness, people development, environmentally conscious etc.

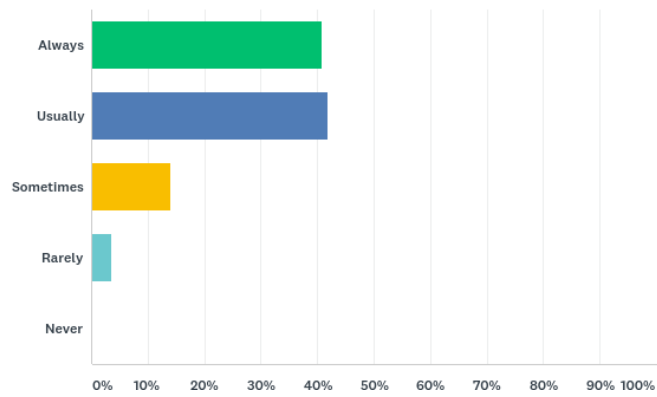
- Answered: 84
- Skipped: 2

Q9

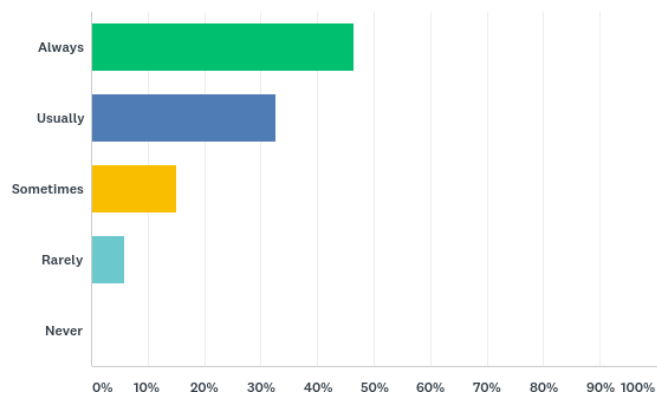
What part of your operation are you least proud of and why? E.g.: Profit, tidiness, people development, environmentally conscious.

- Answered: 78
- Skipped: 8

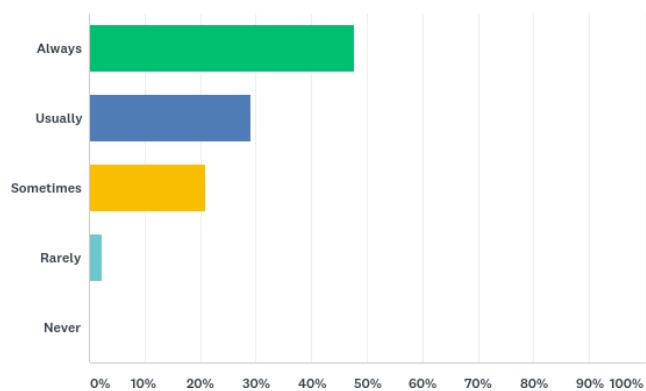
Q10 Do you connect with the people around you? Eg: Family, friends, neighbours



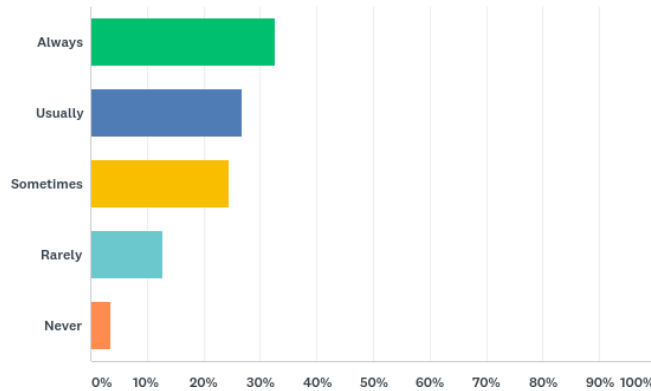
Q11 Are you continually developing and learning new things ? (include business development and growth)



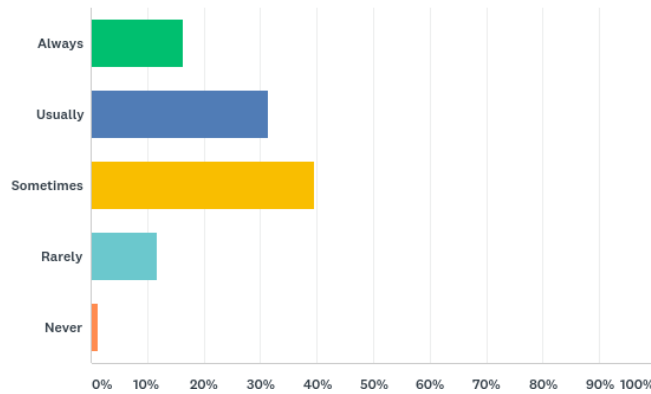
Q12 Are you physically active? (at work or in sport)



Q13 Do you donate your time or give to charities?



Q14 Do you appreciate the little things, or are you just too busy?



Q15

What advice would you give your younger self starting out in business ownership to keep the passion alive?

- Answered: 79
- Skipped: 7

Q16

Do you have any further comments to add to the idea that Groundhog Day is an issue for farm owners as they are unable to exit or change jobs as easily as other industries?

- Answered: 55
- Skipped: 31

## **Appendix 2: Survey introduction**

Giddy guys,

My Kellogg project "Understanding the effect of Groundhog Day in farm ownership" requires your input. If you ever feel stuck in a rut, sick of the day to day jobs, then this could be of great benefit to not only you but also your business and family. Unlike other industries changing jobs is not as simple in farming as you don't just sell up and move on because you're a bit over it. Initial research suggests that this is a far bigger issue than first thought, so you are certainly not alone. The survey is completely anonymous, and you can share your feelings knowing that everything is confidential. Even if you've managed to keep the passion alive after many years farming then your input is invaluable as you've obviously got the recipe right.

Leyton King

## **Appendix 3: Question to mental health experts**

I am doing a Kellogg project on "Tackling the effects of Groundhog Day in farm ownership". I would really appreciate your opinion.

Can you please comment on the following question?

Do you see Groundhog Day (bored of the day to day jobs) as an issue for farm owners?

Farm owners have so much invested so hard to make big decisions like taking on a new career.

We work long hours often seven days a week. We live on property often with staff as well so hard to remove yourself from the pressures of farming.

Cheers

Leyton King