



2018 RUNNER-UP: **RUTH WILLS**

Farming Community Network sees stress-related calls soar

Many farmers are struggling to deal with stress following the summer drought, with the Farming Community Network (FCN) inundated with calls for help.

“This is the busiest summer we have had in a long time with calls to our helpline running at over twice the seasonal norm,” said Glyn Evans, regional director at FCN.

Water shortages, lack of forage and withering crops are lying heavy on farmers’ minds – which can have devastating effects. “The added burden on farmers caused by this year’s weather extremes may lead to a loss of concentration and taking shortcuts, with the almost inevitable resulting increase in farm accidents,” warned Charles Smith, CEO at FCN.

“We are bracing ourselves for a very busy winter - all the extra and unrelenting stress will almost certainly have a huge impact on the mental wellbeing of many in the farming community.”

From a practical perspective, the NFU and Forage Aid have set up a Fodder Bank to help farmers fulfil their winter shortfall. However, the effects of stress can be more difficult to manage.

According to the Farm Safety Foundation signs to look out for include:

- Change in sleep patterns
- Feeling at the end of your tether
- Poor concentration, feeling irritable or angry
- Change in appetite, feeling unwell or nervous
- Increased drinking or smoking
- Indecisiveness or forgetfulness

“Talking about your feelings isn’t a sign of weakness – it’s taking charge of your wellbeing and doing what you can to stay healthy,” explained Dr Antonis Kousoulis at the Mental Health Foundation. “Talking can be a way to cope with a problem you’ve been carrying around in your head for a while – just being listened to can help you feel supported and less alone.”

Farmer case study:

Nigel Gribble keeps 120 beef cattle and 90 suckler cows at Uphill Farm, Launceston, Cornwall, and has made some drastic decisions to cope with the impacts of the drought.

The problem began with the wet weather last summer, which meant Mr Gribble had to house his animals in October – the earliest he had ever done so. Throughout the long wet winter he used more silage than ever before, purchasing £10,000 of forage and straw.

This year first cut silage yields were poor, and the cows ended up grazing all the second cut. Faced with such a shortfall, and with fodder prices continuing to rise, he decided to reduce his cow numbers. But in the current market he would lose £150 a head, so he opted to gradually reduce his herd by 15 per cent before eventually building up again sometime in the future.

“It’s stressful, all the money is going out, not coming in.” This has led Mr Gribble to make another difficult decision: to get a part-time job. “I feel guilty – why should my kids suffer?”

Practical worries and financial concerns have undoubtedly taken their toll. “But once I had made those difficult decisions, I felt so much better.”

Written for Farmers Weekly

