Farmers Find Support at Australian Workshops

By Madeline Schultz
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Our little team of four from Iowa State University were among thousands of tourists who streamed along the Great Ocean Road to visit the famous 12 Apostles in the Southern Ocean in early March, 2019. Most were unaware of the challenges faced by farmers in the region. With 1,500 dairy farms, Southwest Victoria is one of three major areas that contribute to the state’s production of more than $1.8 billion in raw milk sales and 65 percent of Australia’s national milk production.

Dairy Australia explains the southern Australia coastal areas typically have enough rainfall to produce approximately 60–65% of cattle feed requirements from grazed pastures. This results in cost efficient, high-quality milk production.

It was fascinating to learn about the historical Heytesbury Project. This resulted from the Land Settlement Act legislated in 1954. From 1959 to 1976, 43,000 hectares (106,255 acres) of eucalyptus forests were converted to 378 pasture based dairy, beef and sheep farms to assist war veterans in the development of rural areas. A short 50 years later, the newly established farm families are wondering how to remain viable in today’s farming economy.

In recent years, farmers in Victoria were set back by wide spread bushfires and drought. The downward trend of global commodity prices for milk and the low bargaining power of dairy farmers for fair prices also contributed to tough times for dairy farmers. Structural changes in the industry towards larger and fewer dairy farms also made it difficult for smaller farms to stay in business. Dairy Australia reports Victoria lost 9 percent of its dairy farms between 2012 and 2017¹. The story is familiar. Iowa lost 12 percent of its dairy farms between 2012 and 2017 according to the USDA Census of Agriculture².

The Victorian government is working to support dairy farmers in the region. As Kapil Arora, Kelvin Leibold, Lisa Scarbrough and myself were planning our travels to Australia for the International Farm Management Association Congress, we contacted Donna Edge, a Victorian dairy farmer and family friend, who connected us with professionals from the State of Victoria’s Colac Area Health and Rural Financial Counseling services. We worked together to develop a farm strategies workshop for men and women on March 9, and a women’s wellness on the farm workshop on March 12.

We held the two workshops at Cobrico Public Hall located on a gravel road between expanses of rye grass pasture and small eucalyptus forests about 2½ hours west of Melbourne. The first program included strategies for diversification, making sense of financial statements, family communication tips and ideas for managing farm debt. The second program covered women’s changing roles in agriculture, balance sheet conversations, and stress management.

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach team had meaningful discussions with the local farmers who asked many good questions. They were keen to know how things were going for Iowa farmers such as how the farm subsidies were working for farmers, the impact of climate change on Iowa farms, and whether or not dairy farmers in Iowa were better off. Many expressed feeling frustrated that agriculture is under-valued in Australia.
Symone Vines attended a workshop. She works in foster care and her husband, Phil, manages a neighboring 750-hectare dairy farm. Together, they and their four children milk 300 cows with the help of robotics. When they moved to their farm a few years ago, there were 270 kids in the local school; now there are less than 100. “Farm families are leaving the community,” explained Symone, “On our stretch of road there were 20 dairies, now there are only a handful.” Like many dairy farmers in the area, the Vines are wondering how long they can keep treading water. Symone is exploring the possibility of agri-tourism, perhaps attracting some of those Great Ocean Road tourists.

We were surprised to learn the dairy farmers did not feel supported by the Australian government. George Leishman, a Rural Financial Counseling advisor for the state of Victoria, attended a workshop. He explained there are not enough local resources, “I am usually called in when it’s too late,” he said, “By the time I sit down with a farmer, they are probably going out of business.” A producer levy on dairy cows and the Australian government fund Dairy Australia. While this organization strives to support the industry, workshop participants said it is not enough. Australian universities support agriculture through research. However, Extension and Outreach, as we know it in Iowa, does not exist in Victoria.

Ann-Marie Byrne, Social Worker and Farming Community Support Practitioner, and Abbie Cameron, Community Engagement Officer, are part of a Colac Area Health initiative launched in 2016 by the state of Victoria to support the wellbeing of dairy farmers. They were pleased the workshops brought people together. “It was interesting that the information shared from the farmers themselves turned out to be great in that they all felt supported [by each other] and were surprised they had so much in common. This was because of the safe place you [the ISU team] created and we were grateful for that,” shared Ann-Marie.

References:
²https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Iowa