



Good health and wellbeing in rural and remote Australia.

MEDIA RELEASE

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Half of Australia's farm workers exposed to dangerous noise levels

A study reported in the April 2015 issue of the Australian Journal of Rural Health (AJRH) has found that 51 per cent of the nation's farm workers are regularly exposed to daily noise levels above the Australian Exposure Standard. Using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, it is estimated that around 163,000 Australian agricultural workers are affected.

Hearing loss affects approximately one in six people and with an ageing population this is projected to increase to one in four by 2050. Australian farmers are particularly at risk because of their long-term exposure to harmful noise levels from tractors, workshop tools, heavy machinery and firearms. A previous study found that, on average, the hearing-age profile for farmers was 10-15 years worse when compared with the general Australian population.

The paper titled *Farmers' work-day noise*¹ presented the research findings and debunked the myth that noise exposure is primarily a men's health issue because of assumptions about traditional work roles of male farmers. It was found that noise exposure affected men and women equally, reflecting the more fluid divisions of labour within agriculture today.

The report also showed hearing loss negatively impacts many areas of a person's life and is often described as an underestimated health issue. The authors wrote "Hearing loss impacts across life, work and family domains and has significant adverse psycho-social effects on those involved. Notably, people with hearing loss report increased rates of affective mood disorders and poorer social relations".

On a positive note, the use of simple on-farm audits in conjunction with report booklets on noise level management, and their significant noise sources, proved to be effective in raising farmers' awareness and assist in reducing their noise exposure.

The NRHA has produced a fact sheet on *Hearing Loss in Rural Australia*. In very remote areas there is less than the equivalent of one full-time speech pathologist and audiologist per 10,000 people compared to 3.5 in the major cities. As is the case with most health issues in rural and remote communities, access to health professionals worsens with remoteness.

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¹ Williams, W., Brumby, S., Calvano, A., Hatherell, T., Mason, H., Mercer-Grant, C. and Hogan, A. (2015), Farmers' work-day noise exposure. Australian Journal of Rural Health, 23: 67-73. doi: 10.1111/ajr.12153