

Experiences in supporting primary producers' recovery from the Pinery bushfire, South Australia

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Abstract. Recovery from a disaster is more successful when driven by the affected community and supported by Government and non-Government agencies, organisations and volunteers. South Australia's Pinery fire in November 2015 severely affected over 150 primary producers and caused devastating losses. The provision of appropriate support relied on clearly understanding the values, motivations, beliefs, relationships, networks and connections of affected individuals. Primary Industries and Regions SA's (PIRSA) role was primarily to identify sources of appropriate help and assistance that farmers trusted and was consistent with their existing knowledge, understanding and philosophies. In the agricultural community of the Pinery fire area, there is a wealth of knowledge amongst the primary producers and service providers, as well as significant leadership skills that provided a strong base for the sector's recovery. PIRSA staff liaised with producer networks, leaders, influencers and service providers in primary production to assist primary producers to access appropriate support and assistance.

Keywords: empathy, listening, needs, disaster, resilience, recovery.

Introduction

On November 25th 2015, a fast, voracious fire swept through some of South Australia's most productive farming land burning 82,600 hectares, and destroying 97 houses, 546 sheds and outbuildings, and 413 vehicles and pieces of machinery. Livestock losses included 18,600 sheep, cattle, horses and pigs, and 54,000 poultry. The value of crops, hay, straw and paddock feed lost was estimated to be over \$30 million. Four months after the fire, the Insurance Council of Australia noted that 2030 insurance claims had been made, valued at just under \$172 million.

People's recovery from a disaster such as a fire is supported in many ways and Governments have procedures in place to coordinate the provision of a range of services to assist recovery. However, it is well recognised that the most effective recovery is one that is driven by the affected community.

In this paper, the farming area affected by the fire and its aftermath are described, including the effects on primary producers and responses that were made by individuals, communities and those who assisted them after the fire. Similarities are described between the provision of appropriate support for recovery and successful extension programs, where primary producers identify their learning needs, and lead and participate in programs that meet those needs.

The agricultural community in the fire area

The Pinery fire area is in the Lower North district of South Australia. Nearly all of the land in the fire scar is used for agricultural production and most of it is intensively cropped (cereals, canola, hay and pulses including lentils.) Some of the State's leading farmers and farm businesses were affected by the fire. The farming community includes at least 2 Nuffield Scholars; a former Professor of Plant Science at Adelaide University; industry leaders with Grains Research and Development Corporation, Grains Producers SA, National Grains Council, Meat and Livestock Australia and Agricultural Societies Council of SA; and winners of Australia Day and Queens Honours awards for services to agriculture and the agricultural community.

There are three active branches of the Agricultural Bureau of South Australia in the area and two of these are particularly strong. The Agricultural Bureau movement was formed in 1888, (before the existence of a Department of Agriculture) as 'self-help' clubs of farmers interested in improving agricultural production. Many primary producers in the area are members of groups such as the South Australian No-Till Association, livestock producer groups, and / or clients of agricultural consultants, advisers and agricultural resellers.

South Australia's history of land settlement has resulted in agricultural land tending to stay under the ownership of several generations and branches of farming families. Family names tend to have long associations with particular areas. The eastern part of the fire area was adjacent to the Barossa Valley and many of the farmers in the area are of German ancestry.

These long-term networks and associations have resulted in strong connections throughout the agricultural sector which was evident from the numbers of messages and phone calls received by the fire-affected from their contacts.

The effect of the fire on primary producers

One farmer died and several were badly injured fighting the fire; there were numerous 'near-miss' anecdotes. For some primary producers, it was total devastation – loss of homes, business 'headquarters', sheds, machinery, vehicles, equipment, fences, watering systems, crops and livestock. In the western part of the fire area, whole properties were burnt. Those least affected tended to have damaged fences and some crop losses. Most farmers were involved in fighting the fire using their farm fire-fighting units.

Immediately following the fire, and for days and weeks afterwards, primary producers described being traumatised, shocked, grieving, overwhelmed, unable to think straight, and deeply concerned for family, friends, neighbours and community members. Some felt a kind of guilt because their losses were not as severe as others.

The days following the fire were occupied with dealing with dead and injured livestock, assessing losses, checking on how neighbours and friends had fared, clearing debris, speaking to insurance assessors, and dealing with countless phone calls, messages and people calling in offering help such as hay, agistment, labour, fencing materials and food.

The fire had been driven by severe winds and these persisted for days afterwards. Soil that was now totally devoid of surface cover began to blow away and for many this was as devastating as the fire itself. Primary producers had been keeping stubbles and minimising soil disturbance for decades and had not seen erosion for many years. Now they were constantly being enveloped in dust storms and seeing soil accumulate at fencelines and on roads.

The beginning of recovery.

Primary producers need to have some resilience as they have to deal with the vagaries of weather, markets and nature. They are unable to control these and many other factors so have to adapt and manage accordingly. They also manage risk by insuring their businesses against fire. Many value their independence and self-reliability. Therefore in the immediate aftermath of a fire, farmers tend to start repairing, restoring, rebuilding and re-establishing with some financial security from having insurance cover.

The day after the Pinery fire, many farmers started addressing the problem of soil erosion. They experimented using various techniques to roughen the soil surface and restrict the wind sweep over the ground. Using their mobile phones, they compared notes and observations with one another to see what worked or did not work. Tractors and machinery were loaned, borrowed or hired.

Exactly a week after the fire, a workshop and field day was held to discuss how to manage the soil following the fire. The day was organised by Mallala Agricultural Bureau members and supported by consultants, advisers, agribusiness, and government and non-government organisations. Over 150 people participated. The organisers realised that providing an opportunity for fire-affected people to get together would be good for their mental health and they also asked a nationally-known change management and emotional resilience consultant to speak about physical and mental well-being.

Community-led recovery

People affected by fire can be bombarded by goodwill and good intent – donations, offers of assistance and services, advice; everyone wants to help. However, this comes on top of the trauma and shock the farmers are already experiencing and the overwhelming scenario they face to restore their lives to some sense of normality. Many of the offers of help are based on what the providers think is needed, not necessarily on what the affected person needs.

The keys to successful recovery are supporting self-help and strengthening the resources, capacity and resilience already present within people and communities. To do this, recovery efforts should, amongst other things, seek to address the needs of those affected; allow individuals, families and communities to manage their own recovery; use and develop community knowledge, leadership and resilience; and recognise that people and communities might choose different paths to recovery (Australian Emergency Management Institute 2011).

This is similar to the concept of Landcare developed in the 1980s where Landcare group members decided what they wanted to do and how they were going to do it, with the support of government and non-government organisations (Millar 2011). The most successful 'holistic' property management planning programs were ones where all members of a farming business articulated their personal and business visions and goals and these were incorporated into the property's plan (Sustainable Land and Water Resources Management Committee 1999).

Recognising and supporting individuals' needs, beliefs and values gives the individual greater ownership of and accountability for the delivery of outcomes. Achievement of the outcomes strengthens the individual's capacity and resilience.

Meeting primary producers' needs

In recovery from emergencies, Primary Industries and Regions SA's (PIRSA) commission is supporting the economic recovery of primary industries. However, there is often an immediate assumption that this means providing fact sheets and bulletins, organising workshops and providing advice to farmers on how to manage the land, replace infrastructure, look after livestock, re-establish the business, and grow crops again. This approach ignores the complexity of the situation, disrespects the bank of skills, experience and knowledge that the farmers still have (and has not been wiped from their brains by the fire) and the fact that there is no 'manual' for recovery. It also fails to consider how farmers have acquired their wealth of knowledge and ability to run very successful businesses. Its most significant failing is to recognise that the most successful recovery will be driven by the affected person themselves based on their aspirations and what they need to achieve those.

Immediately after the fire, PIRSA appointed a 'Recovery Facilitator' to work with primary producers and primary industries affected by the Pinery fire. The role of the facilitator was to:

- identify the needs of primary producers and primary industries
- identify support required to meet those needs and sources of appropriate assistance
- collaborate with other Government agencies, Local Government and non-government organisations to provide a coordinated range of services
- participate as a member of Pinery Fire Local Recovery Committee to support the community-led recovery process
- provide a PIRSA contact to liaise with and respond to enquiries from the affected community.

The facilitator attended community meetings, conferred with primary producer community members of the Local Recovery Committee, liaised with staff of other Government agencies and non-government organisations on matters related to primary producers, and held two 'think tanks' with a small group of affected farmers. She conducted 1:1 interviews 15 months after the fire with a small number of primary producers to gauge their recovery progress. The facilitator had a network of PIRSA staff, farmers and agribusiness people with whom she spoke to 'check the pulse' of the agricultural community. She also conferred with organisations providing services to affected primary producers such as Rural Business Support and Livestock Producer SA's fodder coordinator. The facilitator also had a dedicated phone number as a contact for members of the community to use for matters related to the fire and primary industries.

A difficult aspect of the fire for some primary producers was managing the range of help, volunteer support and donations offered. Farmers have commented that on the day of the fire and immediately afterwards, they were flooded with offers of help. They found this particularly challenging when they were still in shock, confused and unable to think straight. Finding tasks for volunteers and then spending time with them to make sure the job was done properly, was too hard for some. Others did take up the offers of help when they did not really want to because they did not want to appear impolite or ungrateful. Volunteers are generally sympathetic and genuine in their desire to help but resources and efforts can be misdirected into meeting their needs rather than the people who have been affected.

Understanding what primary producers needed after the Pinery fire was quite complex because some had been bereaved, some had lost their homes and offices, and more grain producers had been significantly affected compared to previous fires which had greater impact on livestock producers. Several farmers lost millions of dollars' worth of harvesting machinery in the Pinery fire. Needs varied from person to person, property to property, depending on how the fire affected them physically, financially and emotionally, and their individual personal and business situations, beliefs, values and capacity. Ascertaining what those needs were required empathy.

An empathetic approach is focussed on the affected person. Key skills are listening, concentrating solely on what the other person is saying, and asking open-ended questions that help gauge how someone thinks and feels (and in some situations, how stressed they are). For example, asking someone 'How will the loss of fencing affect you?' rather than 'How much fencing have you lost?' could reveal that fencing was not a major concern as the farmer did not have livestock despite the fact 10 kilometres of fence had been burnt.

Many people are sympathetic and tend to act from a position of 'If that was me, this is how I would feel and this is what I would want', that is, on the basis of their own beliefs and values. These are the people who help 'clean up' by throwing everything away and getting rid of the

rubbish, not realising that the 'rubbish' still holds some sentimental value for the affected person. They are the people who say 'you should be ...' rather than 'have you thought about...?'

There are some who are 'empathetic' – those who offer support and help motivated by a need to feel good about themselves, or gain attention, recognition and publicity. Often their support is highly conditional i.e. their help is not forthcoming until their needs have been met (e.g. recognition, accommodation, sponsorship).

Using an empathetic approach can help farmers identify, prioritise and organise what they need to do. A listener cognisant of the range of support services and assistance available through non-government organisations, government agencies and volunteers can help identify where appropriate support can be found if needed. Many extension workers have these skills.

Feedback from the second 'think tank' and the 1:1 interviews with primary producers more than 12 months after the fire, indicated that primary producers felt that they had been well supported in their recovery. Most, however, said that while they had been aware of the support on offer, they had not needed it or preferred to draw on their own resources, such as assistance from family, friends, neighbours and their farmer networks (Young 2017).

Community-led initiatives after the fire

Recovery from emergencies and disasters is usually instigated by a government agency which then consults with the affected community to establish a Local Recovery Committee, chaired by an appointed Recovery Coordinator. The Committee comprises community representatives, Local Government representatives (usually community development officers), and representatives of government, non-government and volunteer agencies and organisations who provide support services in the four domains of recovery: social, infrastructure, economic and natural environment. The Coordinator and Committee members communicate with the affected community in a number of ways to identify what the community's needs are and what people's vision of recovery is. This is the foundation for a community-led recovery process. The various organisations and agencies involved collaborate to provide a range of services to support that recovery. Liaising with other support workers and understanding their capacities is important in knowing how people's needs can be met.

In the Pinery fire agricultural community, the strong networks that existed amongst some farmers, such as the Agricultural Bureau groups, were encouraged to organise events and activities that they wanted to do (such as the soil management workshop and field trip) and seek support from the PIRSA Recovery Facilitator or the Local Recovery Committee when needed (e.g. Plate 1).

Plate 1. Local farmer discussing his methods of stabilising sandy soils at soil management workshop.



Source: M-A Young, PIRSA.

The Grains Research and Development Corporation organised two 'Farming after Fire' seminars, and PIRSA and Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resource Management organised a seminar for livestock producers, hosted by Livestock Producers SA.

Agricultural businesses and service providers organised farmers from around the state for a week of fencing 'working bees', and livestock agents sourced agistment and fodder donations from their clients. BlazeAid set up two depots and people requiring assistance with clean-up and fencing were encouraged to contact it.

Fodder donations and distribution were initially organised through a few volunteer farmers but it became overwhelming. Livestock Producers SA was supported by PIRSA to appoint a fodder coordinator and a depot was established at the University of Adelaide's Roseworthy farm.

Rural Business Support's rural financial counsellors provided help to individuals who were facing filling out a myriad of forms and dealing with Centrelink, insurance companies and various funding bodies.

PIRSA staff's experiences in working with primary producers in times of drought had heightened our awareness of rural men's health, particularly mental health problems, during stressful times and we were conscious that male farmers were very reluctant at best, to use the conventional health services provided. Agricultural industry groups and organisations are supporting programs that promote good health and well-being of people working in primary industries. It was therefore already understood that farming men talking to farming men would generally be the best means of helping them deal emotionally with the fire. This knowledge had to be conveyed to health service providers who were offering more generalised community health services.

The role of PIRSA's Recovery Facilitator was to be aware of assistance and support on offer across the board and be able to direct people to appropriate sources. Listening carefully to what people were asking for could result in the provision of help from a source they were not expecting.

People unfamiliar, uncomfortable or frustrated with the bureaucratic processes associated with applying for support sometimes abandoned these sources of assistance. PIRSA promoted and administered National Disaster Assistance Scheme grants that provided up to \$10,000 to primary producers to assist with clean up and recovery costs but found that a significant number of eligible primary producers did not apply because 'they didn't need it' or 'it was too much paperwork'. Some also expressed sentiments that they did not want to receive 'handouts' from government.

The role of extension workers in enabling community-led recovery

Community-led recovery requires an understanding of what affected people's needs are. Understanding the needs of the primary producer community requires extension skills to hear, understand and place in context what those needs are, knowing that needs will vary from person to person, property to property.

The extension worker can:

1. Help primary producers to think straight (recognising that they will be highly stressed, if not traumatised). Assist them to plan, prioritise and work out what has to be done, when and how; physically, financially and emotionally: that is, identify what their needs are. During planning, the identification and importance of tasks will reflect the beliefs and values of the people involved.
2. Assist them to access appropriate support such as labour, technical advice, financial security and / or pastoral care.
3. Assist them to use existing networks, groups, services and providers where possible.

In this way, an individual's and the broader community's capacity and resilience can be maintained or strengthened.

Conclusion

A large number of farmers and people in primary industries were badly affected by the Pinery Fire. Each person's recovery from a disaster relies on their emotional, physical and financial resilience - their ability to cope and deal with the event and its aftermath.

There was immediately a very strong desire from the wider agricultural community and industry to help those affected but this help was sometimes more of what could be provided rather than what was needed. Ascertaining the needs of affected people requires empathy and good listening skills rather than making assumptions based on observations.

The agricultural community in the Pinery fire area is particularly strong. Many of the farmers are members of Agricultural Bureau groups, industry associations, client groups and other formal and informal networks. Supporting these networks to enable farmers to help one another problem-solve, share knowledge and experience, and generally look out for one another, is more effective in building their resilience, skills and capacity than providing solutions and answers. The Pinery fire farmers drove their recovery drawing on their own resources, supported by their families, friends, neighbours, colleagues, service providers, volunteers, non-government organisations and government agencies.

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