

# DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE BY FARMING AND FISHING WORKERS

## A RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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This study collected qualitative and quantitative data to describe farm and fishing workers' use of drugs and alcohol, their understanding of drug and alcohol related harms and the influence of workplace culture on drug and alcohol use.

The research was conducted by a team from The Lyndon Community, Monash University, The University of Queensland and Charles Sturt University. It was funded by the Collaborative Partnership for Farming and Fishing Health and Safety from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

**PARTICIPANTS:** Research sites in NSW and Victoria, Australia with either farming or fishing as the key industry were identified for the study via consultation with primary industry leaders. Study participants included key informants, farm and fishing employees and partners of workers.

Potential key informants were initially identified from telephone books and local newspapers. Key informants (n=46) were community members with roles in health, primary industries and business, local government representatives, publicans, police and members of civic groups such as the Country Women's Association.

Farm worker and partner participants were identified through local industry groups and networks by snowball sampling. One hundred and forty five farm and fishing workers/contractors, partners of workers and community leaders across six research sites completed interviews and surveys between November 2010 and May 2011. The age range of participants was 18 to 75 years with an average of 41 years. The farming industry was represented in three sites with a total of 77 participants (53.2%), 46 of whom completed a survey. The fishing industry was represented in three sites with a total of 68 participants (46.8%), 25 of whom completed a survey.

A narrative approach was used to analyse the qualitative data. A narrative analysis highlights the stories participants tell about the study topic. The analysis identified social practices and behavioural norms in relation to substance use

## PILOT SURVEY RESULTS

**METHOD:** Self-complete pen and paper survey.

**MEASURES:** The survey included specific questions in a number of domains, covering farming and fishing workers' demographic and work characteristics; alcohol and drug use; psychological wellbeing; and use of health services.

**DATA ANALYSIS:** Data was analysed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 17.0 for Windows. Demographic characteristics of participants were described using descriptive statistics. Key variables of interest were dichotomised into binomial outcomes. Tests of significance (at the 0.05 level) were obtained using 2x2 contingency tables using  $\chi^2$  tests.

**RESULTS:** Participants were more likely to be male, married, born in Australia, to have not continued education after Year 10, to be working full time, to perceive themselves as being a light, occasional or social drinker, and report low levels of psychological distress. The mean age of participants was 41 years old (SD, 13.8)

Approximately half of the sample had AUDIT scores corresponding to low risk alcohol use. A greater proportion of fishing (60%) versus farming (45.5%) participants reported low risk alcohol use. Similar proportions of farming and fishing participants reported moderate alcohol use. The proportion of farming participants (18.2%) reporting high risk/dependent alcohol use was more than double that reported by fishing participants (8%).

*"What liabilities, or if it's their responsibility if they did some damage, do we sue them because they've come to work drunk? Or are we liable for an accident that they have, even though they're drunk?"*



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TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF AUDIT SCORES BY INDUSTRY

Audit Score	Farming (n=44)			Fishing (n=25)			Full Sample (N=71)		
	n	%	CI 95%	n	%	CI 95%	n	%	CI 95%
Abstinent (0)	1	2.3	(0.0 - 7.7)	0	0.0	-	1	1.4	(<0.1 - 7.6)
Low risk (1-7)	20	45.5	(30.7 - 60.2)	15	60.0	(40.8 - 79.2)	35	49.3	(37.2 - 61.4)
Moderate risk (8-15)	13	29.5	(16.1 - 43.0)	8	32.0	(13.7 - 50.3)	21	29.6	(19.3 - 41.6)
High risk (16-19)	5	11.4	(2.0 - 20.7)	1	4.0	(0.0 - 11.7)	6	8.5	(3.2 - 17.5)
Dependent (20-25)	3	6.8	(0.0 - 14.3)	1	4.0	(0.0 - 11.7)	4	5.6	(1.6 - 13.8)
Do not wish to answer	2	4.5	(0.0 - 10.7)	0	0.0	-	4	5.6	(1.6 - 13.8)



## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AT RISK ALCOHOL USE AND KEY DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Participants who reported mild psychological distress or higher were statistically significantly more likely to report at-risk alcohol use ( $p < .05$ ). Household income, education attainment, age, sex and industry were not found to be statistically significantly associated with at-risk alcohol use ( $p > .05$ ). Studies using larger samples are required to more reliably determine predictors of risky alcohol use in this population.

TABLE 2: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AT-RISK ALCOHOL USE & OTHER VARIABLES

Demographic characteristic	n	Based on full AUDIT Score	
		Low risk (n=36) <sup>^</sup> %	At-risk (mod/high/depend) (n=31) %
<b>Industry</b>			
Farming	44	50.0	50.0
Fishing	25	60.0	40.0
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	55	50.9	49.1
Female	12	66.7	33.3
<b>Age</b>			
18 - 39 years	28	46.4	53.6
40 years or older	39	59.0	41.0
<b>Educational attainment</b>			
Year 10 or less	34	52.9	47.1
Year 12/TAFE/Apprenticeship/Dip/Uni	32	53.1	46.9
<b>Household income before tax</b>			
\$0 - \$41,599	22	40.9	59.1
\$41,600+	43	60.5	39.5
<b>Psychological distress (K10)*</b>			
10-19 Likely to be well	53	60.4	39.6
20+ mild distress or higher	14	28.6	71.4

"Yeah. As soon as we finished work and that we'd go straight to the pub and have a big feed and just hit the piss and that. Just celebrate our catch basically."





*"I'll always have a couple of beers at home, probably about half a dozen a day. That's after work. At home a couple of long necks, that's equivalent to about four of them."*

*"If someone drops around you've got to have beer. That is common practice. As soon as you run out of beer there is a potential problem. If someone drops around and you can't offer them a beer personally you would feel that you'd failed."*

*"You might catch up with a few people in the district, have a few beers in the shed or something, and talk about what's been happening for the last few weeks. Generally most people are working that 15 to 18 hours, then they're sleeping for five or six hours and then they're back into it again."*

*They've gone and got on the grog, jobs not getting done properly, but it still needs to get done properly, and they've got on the grog, and we've said, no, finish the job.*

*"Yeah, I had my mate that was going to work just out the road here one morning last year on harvest time and he was just doing big hours and he went and had a few beers and went home and that morning he just fell asleep at the wheel and it just caught up to him – he died."*

*"There's almost that intrinsic rite of passage - this is what we do, we finish off...we don't have orange juice after, everyone has a beer, and if you don't have a beer you're not a man."*

*"You drive in and I'll have a couple of beers. Then you get tangled up with your mates and next thing you have another three and next thing you're half cut and you try to drive home and the breathalyser gets you."*

Alcohol is used at moderate to high risk or dependent levels by around 44% of study participants. This is considerably higher than in the general Australian population where 16% of rural dwellers are moderate to high risk drinkers (ABS 2006).

Younger participants reported binge drinking (10 or more drinks once or twice a week) at social gatherings whereas older participants reported drinking large amounts (5-8 drinks) regularly, often daily, at home. Women consume alcohol at high risk levels as frequently as men.

There is limited awareness of how much alcohol people are consuming and what the long term health implications are. An AUDIT score-interview comparison found that participants rounded down how many drinks they consumed.

**Research participants described the biggest impact of alcohol consumption as losing their driver's licence. Other problems described included spending too much money and being hung over at work.**

Illicit drugs were used by some people in the industry. Cannabis was the most common (12.7%) followed by amphetamines (8.5%). 20% of participants reported working under the influence of illicit drugs during the past 12 months.

Tobacco was used by 36% of study participants and was the drug that caused participants most concern.



*"It's still a bit against the norm of what farming is, to not have a drink and not be involved in it, because it's so intrinsically there."*

## WORKPLACE FACTORS

High risk times for the influence of alcohol at work are on Saturdays, in September during football finals, and during the harvest season.

Employees have to be seriously affected (e.g. staggering gait, slurred speech) by drugs or alcohol to be noticed by employers even though employers believed they could tell who was unfit for work. Many participants described examples of working while affected by alcohol including being drunk or hung-over.

Employers accept high alcohol and drug use of certain subgroups such as deckhands, shearers and truck drivers on the grounds of the group's traditional substance using culture. Some employers ignored drug and alcohol use by employees because of labour shortages particularly during the harvest season.

There is a strong perception that as long as people are able to work there is no problem with alcohol no matter how much an individual drinks. While most employers do not endorse drugs and alcohol at the workplace they do not view an employee's drinking behaviour outside work as work related.

## ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC SUBSTANCE USE

Many employers are unaware of their legal responsibilities and rights in relation to alcohol affected employees who have accidents. Frequently this situation is complicated by the use of family members and friends who are unpaid.

Most participants described substance use problems as the individual's responsibility and that they had to help themselves. There was limited awareness of the way community support for heavy drinking encourages high risk alcohol consumption.

### Employees are unlikely to seek healthcare, when they do their conditions are usually serious.

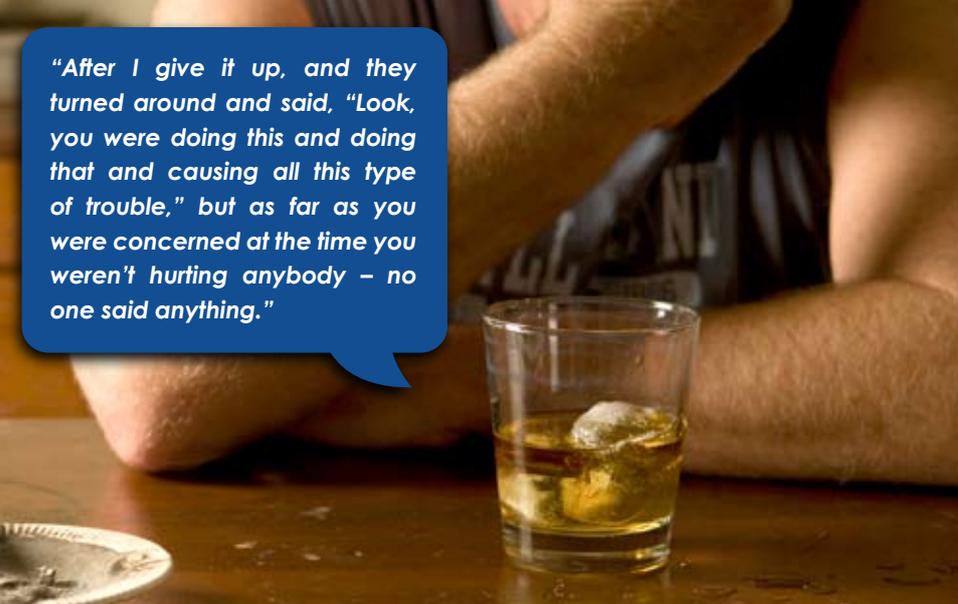
Access to substance use and mental health services is limited and inconsistent. Help for problematic substance use is made more inaccessible because problems are minimised, hidden or ignored.

## CONCLUSION

### Problematic substance use, especially alcohol, goes to the heart of industry productivity even though most people do not connect out of work substance use with workplace health and safety.

Drug and alcohol interventions such as screening and workplace policies, are effective when accessible to the population. Screening assesses an individual's substance use over a period of time and provides information and assistance in addressing harmful use. Testing such as breath, urine or saliva testing identifies if the individual has that substance in their body at the time of the test. Fair Work Australia has made some recent rulings on workplace substance testing.

Challenges include making interventions fit with the industry context and work practices. Employers may need advice and support to address substance use, particularly alcohol, directly with employees and to develop work place practices that discourage alcohol use. Farm and fishing workers need ready access to information and support to reduce harmful alcohol and tobacco use.



*"After I give it up, and they turned around and said, "Look, you were doing this and doing that and causing all this type of trouble," but as far as you were concerned at the time you weren't hurting anybody – no one said anything."*

*"Yeah. They [Deckhands] get paid on Friday and they're broke on Saturday so they're down borrowing money off you on Saturday afternoon. They're bluing with their missus because they get on the piss, or their girlfriends, ... They usually go DUI or do something stupid so then you've got to try and sort out and get them to court at the right time and then you can get them to work and then you've got to sign a piece of paper to say they work for you and they're of good character and this, that and something else."*

*"That's six blokes up in [town] here, just only about three weeks ago now, that were sacked from the shearing shed for using marijuana and drinking on the board at lunch time. I don't agree with the drinking on board at lunch time or the smoking, it affects you. And the hand piece is a very dangerous thing. If they find out you're drinking or drugs, your compensation's all null and voided."*

*"They have to recognise that they've got a problem. I know over the years we have had guys like that and all you can do is take the attitude, "He's doing his job, what he does outside of his hours we can try and assist him but really we don't have a great deal of control over that."*

*"It's always pass the buck. You ring up one person and then you've got to go to somewhere else and they say they'll get back to you. They say, "I'll get back to you in three or four days," but ... Yeah, you don't ring up for help if you don't want it. You need it right then and then. Stop the delay for a start. You know?"*



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