Landscapes and lifescapes of support for mental health in farming

Convenors:

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Topic:

Research has shown that some people in farming communities, including farmers, workers,
and family members, suffer from poor mental health. The 'landscapes of support'[1] for these
people are comprised of formal and informal providers, which include qualified healthcare
professionals, mental health and farm support charities, and so-called 'accidental
counsellors' – individuals who travel down the farm track for different purposes, yet become
trusted confidants. Levels of trust in these supporters vary. However, these roles can expose
them to emotionally challenging situations (e.g. bereavements, animal disease outbreaks),
and many experience poor mental health themselves as a result of secondary trauma[2]. Whilst
some of these individuals have their own formal support networks, many do not, and rely on
the construction of their own landscape of support. Our session explores how life and work (in
all its forms) in the agricultural sector can affect mental health and what types of support
networks and interventions, including those provided through, or for, networks of advisors or
other so-called 'accidental counsellors', can help to reduce stressors and help individuals
cope with challenging situations. By addressing mental health as a core element of farmer
health and safety, our session directly aligns with the conference. We will explore how
strengthening mental health across these interconnected groups not only reduces harm but
also enhances the sustainability and attractiveness of farm work, helping to retain a skilled
and healthy rural workforce.

Aims:

We invite contributions that shed further light on how the mental health of those who live and
work in farming communities (including farmers, workers, family members, and 'accidental
counsellors') can be better supported including from a structural or psychological
perspective. We particularly invite contributions on how interventions can be tailored to
different roles, work types, and demographic groups, taking into account the intersecting
influences of age, gender, race, sexuality, and disability. We are particularly interested in
how the landscape of support for so-called 'accidental counsellors' working with farmers
could be improved. To this end, we invite contributions that consider how the job role of so-
called 'accidental counsellors' and the nature of their work could affect the role they play in
supporting mental health on the farm[3]. We want the session to help share new knowledge,

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[1] Shortland et al. (2023). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soru.12414
[2] Wheeler et al. (2025). https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016725002724
[3] Palczynski et al. (forthcoming). Accidental counsellor or accidental confidant? Interrogating the potential role of so-called
'accidental counsellors' in the landscapes of support for farmer mental health. Presented at ESEE 2025.

stimulate discussion, and bring colleagues together from across geographical boundaries. The session will provide a synthesis of current knowledge around mental health in farming communities and the role of diverse support networks, identify gaps and priorities for research and practice, and provide opportunities for participants to connect, collaborate, and initiate joint outputs (e.g. special issue proposals, comparative studies, cross-national projects).

Format:
 c.15 min time limit per speaker, no set format – could be traditional academic papers or something more creative. Number of sessions determined by submissions.