



## Dairy Farmer Insights into Natural Disasters



Justin Walsh, at his dairy farm in Jaspers Brush

### Recovery through Networks

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#### Justin Walsh’s Story

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Leaning on personal and professional networks helps farmers make better decisions, reduces stress, and speeds up recovery in difficult conditions caused by extreme climatic events like flooding and prolonged wet weather.

This was the experience of Justin Walsh whose dairy farm in Jaspers Brush, near Nowra on the NSW south coast, suffered regular inundation and periods of prolonged wet weather during the

first half of 2022, and endured periods of prolonged wet weather again in 2024.

“In 2022 we experienced multiple flooding events, at least four or five, it was hard to tell when one finished and the next one started,” recalls Justin.

With two thirds of the 450-acre farm at times under water, Justin felt constant and intense pressure while trying to make good decisions in rapid succession. To maintain the immediate and long-term



*Feeding out fodder on a temporary feedpad on Justin's farm*

health and productivity of his 350 strong herd he admits that the stress was at times overwhelming.

"I remember thinking, 'why is my brain not working, this is easy, I should be able to work this out', and I just couldn't, and everyone's looking to you for answers," he says.

For Justin, crucial support came by tapping into his network.

**"A network to me is just people I interact with on a daily basis, like product suppliers, vets, agronomists, nutritionists, other farmers, and also friends and family."**

While service providers gave important ad-hoc advice, Justin feels it was talking to farmers that was most impactful in helping him deal with the constantly changing problems arising during periods of prolonged wet weather, when normal practices either weren't working or weren't an option.

"We're all trying different things and experimenting to find solutions to the same problems and so we're happy to share information about what has worked and also importantly, what hasn't worked," he says.

When initial challenges around feeding cows and nutrition gave way to longer term animal health issues such as mastitis, lameness, and a drop in fertility, Justin again turned to his network.

**"Leaning on my networks in the time when I desperately needed them has actually sped up our recovery process because the decisions you make in those stressful times can have long lasting impact on the business."**



*Debris caught in fencing following recent flooding*

## Accepting Help

Jane Woolacott, an Extension Advisor and Farm Engagement Lead with Dairy Australia, has supported farmers impacted by severe flooding and bushfire, and seen firsthand how strong networks help producers respond better in an emergency and speeds up their recovery.

In 2022 Jane was tasked with contacting dairy farmers impacted by severe flooding in the NSW Northern Rivers to find out what damage had occurred and what help was required. She says that at times it can be tricky for people who are part of a farmer's network to know how they can be of assistance.

"For some people the best course of action might be getting on the phone and saying, 'are you okay? What do you need?' For others it is going to be coming down that driveway and just doing whatever needs doing on the day. It really depends on the person," says Jane.



*Jane Woolacott, an Extension Advisor and Farm Engagement Lead with Dairy Australia*

Through her work Jane has also observed that some farmers, despite being in a bad situation, can be reluctant to ask for or accept help because they feel there are others worse off than them who need the help more.

**"But actually, there's plenty of help to go around and in many cases, agencies need to be asked before they can release the resources, and just because a farmer accepts help it doesn't mean there won't be help available for someone else", says Jane.**

Back at Jaspers Brush, Justin admits that accepting help is something he wasn't always comfortable with, and credits being part of a network as the reason why these days he is more willing to ask for assistance in times of need.

"I do understand it can be very difficult for farmers to receive help at times, but being part of a network means that people ask me for help, which I'm happy to give, which makes it easier for me to reach out when we're in a bad situation," says Justin.

## Building Networks

While a strong network goes a long way to assist farmers in dealing with and recovering from extreme conditions, building one when you don't need it is critically important.

"You can't get to a crisis and then look to build a network. You're not in the mental headspace to be relationship building when there's 300 acres under water and you're wondering where the cows are going to get fed the next day," says Justin.

To help build and maintain his network Justin continues to reach out to other farmers he's called upon during the tough times to see how they're going. His family have used the same veterinary practice for decades, he has a good relationship with the staff and owner at his local farm supplies store, and he speaks with his agronomist and nutritionist regularly throughout the year.

**"My network is not really a formal thing, it's just something that evolves over time," says Justin.**

Justin also considers himself lucky to have

formed a strong long-term relationship with now-retired dairy consultant, John Mulvaney, who he considers a mentor and an important part of his network. The pair met through Dairy Australia workshops and built a relationship over several years by staying in touch between events, and then worked together closely when Justin was part of the Focus Farm program and John was in his support group. While these days the contact is irregular, Justin feels it's reassuring just knowing John is there to call upon if needed.

"If we're in a crisis he reminds me it's a temporary situation and that it will pass, so he helps me see the big picture. I cope better with hard stuff on the farm if there's a timeframe around them and every day is a step closer to it being better", says Justin.

Also, of utmost importance for Justin are elements of his network that are not directly connected to farming, such as members of his basketball team and non-farming friends, who provide valuable time and space away from the farm during those intense periods.

**"Being able to get out of my muddy clothes and have dinner with some friends who weren't talking about farming or distract myself by playing sport was incredibly helpful. It wasn't like the problems weren't there when I got home, but they certainly hadn't gotten any worse while I wasn't thinking about them," says Justin.**

While having a strong network has many benefits, creating one can be tricky. For farmers who live a long way from large

population centres or for whom socialising does not come naturally, industry groups can assist.

"Industry events bring people together for discussions and field days, which can create an informal space for farmers to connect with each other and service providers, who themselves have a very broad range of contacts we are happy to share," says Jane.

For dairy farmers like Justin, the value of a strong network cannot be understated when facing emergency situations like drought, flood or prolonged wet weather now and into the future.

"We just want to get the farm back to normal or as close to normal as possible and as we experience more extreme weather conditions, who knows what the future might hold, so I think it's likely the value of networks will only increase over time".



*Justin Walsh meeting with a service provider from his network*

## Acknowledgments

The Storm and Flood Industry Recovery Program - Dairy Sector Recovery and Resilience is funded by the Australian and NSW Government's Storm and Flood Industry Recovery Program. For more information on this work, please contact the NSW DPIRD dairy unit [dairy@dpiird.nsw.gov.au](mailto:dairy@dpiird.nsw.gov.au).

We would like to acknowledge the NSW dairy farmers and service providers who willingly contributed their time, shared their experiences and provided intellectual input during the Storm and Flood Industry Recovery Program. We would also like to thank Cormac Hanrahan of Cormac Creative Studios for his role in creating the words, videos, and photography for this case study.