

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Bairnsdale — 23 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram

Mr R. G. Mitchell

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Witness

Ms R Grant, Organic Agriculture Association (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Robyn. I have a brief statement to read before we begin. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review.

I also wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural areas. Could you please provide us with your full name, address and the name of the organization you are representing today?

Ms GRANT — My name is Robyn Ann Grant. I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Flaggy Creek, just out of Bairnsdale and I am with the Organic Agriculture Association and I am a committee member of that association.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much Robyn. If you do not mind providing your evidence for 10 minutes or so and then we will have time for questions, please continue.

Ms GRANT — I have been involved in the organic industry for over 20 years and the establishment of the Organic Agriculture Association in 1985 in East Gippsland and at that stage it was known as the East Gippsland Organic Agriculture Association. We have led organic agriculture education in Australia firstly, in summer schools and forums and various other forms of education. Six years ago we ran the first diploma of organic agriculture in Australia. This was actually written by one of our members on a voluntary basis over about six years and we felt that this would assist with the reversibility of unsustainable agriculture in Australia, preferably we worked within Victoria to start with and perhaps retain rural, or stop the decline of rural populations within regional areas and especially the youth.

Some of the problems we incurred were that we found that the local TAFE would not have anything to do with us, perhaps they did not understand organic agriculture, they felt that it would fail. Six years later we are still going, we have influenced hundreds of people. We have run full time courses out of Bairnsdale and part-time courses out of Drouin. We have also run outreach programs in outlying and isolated areas within Victoria plus other regional centres and have extended ourselves into New South Wales.

At the moment we have employed one of our young students to actually write a distance education program. This is very slow going, the Association has had to fund this themselves without any government or any other assistance at all even though we have applied for many grants. Many have come back saying that we are not a sustainable agriculture. We found that local schools have been reluctant to take on organic agriculture and as a consequence a lot of people have not even acknowledged that there is rural agricultural training in Bairnsdale. This year because we decided probably five years would be the limit herewith the population base, so we have now embarked on a semi course where people do a week in Bairnsdale in each unit, a week in Ararat and a week at NMIT in Melbourne. Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE actually took us on as the administrative provider, and we have provided the teachers and the training to students, and that is happening at the moment.

We are still doing the outreach in outlying areas. We found that with such a decline of farmers in Australia and 20,000 in Australia in the last decade, we found that the number of organic farmers is actually increasing. Worldwide and in Australia the number going to the industry there is an increase between 20% and 30% per annum. It is the largest growing agriculture sector worldwide and yet it is often ignored by government and certainly not funded by governments, very little money goes into organic agriculture.

Through our course we have influenced many young people and one of our great success stories has been a young couple who moved to Bairnsdale to actually just do the course, ended up buying land here and since then they have established an organic goat dairy and a state of the art cheese factory, just outside of Bairnsdale. They are supplying local markets, markets into South Gippsland and this spring with their increase in production, will be supplying Melbourne restaurants and other outlets in Melbourne. We have got many other success stories from our course that we have embarked upon.

We are finding that within organic agriculture the farmers are extremely positive and very positive about the future of farming and it is completely a reversal to a lot of conventional farmers. A lot of people have commented on this, people who have had stalls at various agricultural displays and field days and the organic farmers are the enthusiastic ones. They are prepared to be very innovative and are prepared to embark on sustainable systems of

farming. We are finding that more of the organic farmers are finding the local farmers markets are where they want to sell their produce where they have that relationship with their consumers and they often get a higher price than selling through wholesale markets and processes and therefore, the income remains in the community, stimulating the local economy and I suppose part of the organic philosophy is local production for local consumption. Many on a larger scale do sell to wholesalers and so forth.

Young people seem to be attracted to organic farming and quite often this produces a conflict within families because the older generation continues to do it the old way and many of these are unsustainable in our current economic climates or agricultural economic climate. A lot come along to our courses, and field days and so forth and say, we would love to do it, but we cannot because my father will not let me. So we probably need some assistance there to get out further into rural communities to convince people what we are doing, that they can change and that it can be sustainable and it can be productive and economically productive as well.

Organic farms are not permitted to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The emphasis is on soil health and providing healthy plants and therefore healthy people and healthy animals. They often have a high labour requirement, but not all the time. So that employment opportunities in the regional areas can be increased. Quite often they also do evaluating with their product and therefore increase small industries within rural areas. As a result of this the farmer's budget is spent locally instead of going to distant manufacturers of chemicals and fertilisers. Organic farmers are more financially secure with more confidence in the future and as I said before, a more positive outlook for farming and therefore they do not impart negative images on the farming children. I think is very relevant as you quite often see through the rural press, the oppression and so forth of the farming community that there is no hope, why should we encourage our children into such an industry.

But it is quite interesting just looking at organic farming families we are finding that a lot of their children are prepared to work with the farmer, or the father, or the parents on the farm and eventually take it over, and this is happening. Organic farmers have lower input needs and receive higher prices they are less indebted and a lot of them are finding it extremely profitable and because they are getting the premium prices at the moment for produce they can actually survive in an agricultural climate.

Just under the recommendations and strategies, we feel that there needs to be more government assistance to establish different industries in rural areas and providing support for value adding farm produce. We have tried as an organization to do this, and we got one small grant about five years ago where we went out into rural areas, gave talks and did an assessment in rural areas of what infrastructure there was to assist with value adding. Unfortunately, we did not get any more funding and because of our education program we put a lot more emphasis on that. Just like freezer rooms, or butcher shops, Swifts Creek was an example, up there was a butchers shop and it had the cool store and that sort of thing and this could have been used for storing or evaluating product or helping in that area for raspberries and things for holding product and getting into the markets.

We also did an assessment of transport from the more isolated areas to larger centres and it was quite interesting finding out what was going where and what trucks were going where and whether they had facilities for produce and so forth. So that is some of the things that government could look at a little bit more closely and providing support for value adding produce. Grants area more often given to establish business rather than creating new business in these rural centres and the example with the Kapra Cheese and goats cheese people, are not eligible for funding because they did not have a turnover of so much, and they did not have an established business and a lot of the grants required a little bit more than they could offer at this stage.

Perhaps the agricultural department should fund extension offices in organic agriculture. We found in the late eighties when this was part of government policy, where they had extension offices in the organic industry, the industry actually thrived and to have that government backing is extremely important for any industry. It is not just a little industry any more it is quite a large industry within Australia. The levies paid to industry sectors by organic farmers do not come back to the industry and this is in the horticulture research area and various other areas, it does not come back. Very little comes back, there is a small amount which comes through WIROC which is the World Industries Research Organization, so this really needs to happen for the industry to thrive.

More recognition by government that organic agriculture can assist with the environmental degradation in rural areas thus making rural areas healthier and more attractive for youth to return. In this area we have got huge decline with the water quality in our rivers in the lake system which is a shame and a lot of that comes off rural run off. Change of attitudes by government and agribusiness to get big or get out, it is not always the case to be an

economic thing you need to get big. Many organic farmers have very small farms and they are still viable economically and productively. That is about all I have to say, so any questions.

The CHAIR — What are the kinds of employment opportunities that organic industries might offer young people?

Ms GRANT — I suppose education is one of them just in the evaluating industry, marketing, there is a huge range of industry jobs that could be created within rural areas as organic agricultural centre, it is just that we need a little bit of support.

The CHAIR — Robyn thank you very much for your time today for giving us your submission. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time and you may correct typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.