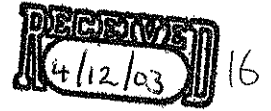




Victorian Farmers Federation



2 December 2003

Mr Ben Hardman MLA
Chairman
Parliament of Victoria Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee
Level 8
35 Spring Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Dear Mr Hardman,

Re: Inquiry into the Cause of Fatality and Injury on Victorian Farms

I write further to the evidence provided during the Public Hearings on 24 November 2003 to the Parliament of Victoria Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee's inquiry into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms.

Drownings in Farm Dams

The Victorian Farmers Federation took on notice a question regarding the VFF response to the Coroner's report findings on child deaths in farm dams.

In October 2002 the State Coroner's Office and Department of Human Services released the report into *Unintentional Drowning: Toddlers in Dams in Victoria 1989-2001*. The study aimed at examining drownings of children aged up to five years in dams. Five key factors identified by the report were age (the children were able to climb and wander some distance), the absence of carer supervision at time of the incident, toddler located outside the house, dam located close to house, and insufficient barriers between the yard and the dam.

In summary, the report made the following findings and recommendations (pages 40-41):

- Future public awareness campaigns by water-safety organisations include messages taking into account the differences between rural and urban water hazards, and how quickly toddlers can get into danger especially in the one to three years age bracket;
- That the farming industry reconsider the use of the "be dam careful" slogan for public awareness campaigns;
- That a feasibility study into conducting the Home Safety Parties Project in various regional towns be undertaken, with the project providing forums for educating carers of toddlers and disseminating safety information;
- That there be wide promotion of the strategy of creating 'child safe areas' on properties containing dams; and
- That fencing the dam itself is not the most practical or cost effective option.

On the issue of fencing dams, the report found that "regardless of the type of property where the toddler drowned, all forms of barricades were negotiated by the toddler" (page 36). In 74 per cent of incidents, there was some form of barricade between the dam but the barricade was inadequate to contain the child. Flaws were found in gaps in fences, gates left open or wire fences being able to be negotiated by toddlers (page 36).

The VFF strongly supports the Coroner's report finding that fencing off farm dams to a level which would be toddler-proof would not be the most practical or effective response. There would be many farms in Victoria for which the fencing off of dams or water sources is not an option, as access is required for livestock welfare.

In response to the *Unintentional Drowning: Toddlers in Dams in Victoria* report, the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance is undertaking a project with the goal of achieving a reduction in the accidental drowning of toddlers in dams. The VFF supports the project as a participant in the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance and will contribute to the project via administration costs.

The Farmsafe Alliance project will work in conjunction with Farm Safety Action Groups (FSAGs) to raise awareness with parents and carers of the issues raised in the State Coroner's and DHS report. The program will involve the promotion by FSAGs of the importance of 'child safe areas' on properties containing dams. This will emphasise the benefits of fencing the house yard to separate the farm workplace from the place where children live and play, with self-latching gates and child-resistant fencing, creating a safe place to play.

The project is proposed to complete a final report in late 2004. The VFF will consider the outcomes of the project at that time to consider what future strategies might be adopted to prevent fatalities from young children drowning in dams and bodies of water on farms.

Role of Local Government

Mr Crutchfield queried whether the VFF saw a role for local government to use its resources to assist with the promotion of farm safety activities.

In response the VFF argued that VFF branches and Farm Safety Action Groups are the most appropriate organisations to drive farm safety awareness campaigns at the regional level.

There is no obvious role for local government in a coordinated, uniform statewide manner.

Indeed, the VFF has serious concerns with State Government cost-shifting additional responsibilities and regulatory compliance onto local government.

On the very day the VFF appeared before the Committee, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration released its report on the Inquiry into Cost Shifting onto Local Government, entitled, *Rates and Taxes: A Fair Share for Responsible Local Government*. This report finds local government has been 'short-changed' by cost-shifting with more functions expected of councils but with 'no or insufficient funds provided to undertake' the functions.

The inquiry heard that the Victorian government is responsible for cost shifts onto local government of \$50 million per year. Given that the report heard evidence of cost shifts of between \$500 million and \$1 billion per year nationally, the \$50 million estimate is likely to understate the true extent of cost shifting to councils in Victoria.

This is a major issue for the VFF and rural Victorians. The State Government is starving local government of funds whilst imposing on them onerous regulatory and compliance burdens. This is forcing significant average rate increases across rural Victoria, which for many councils are greater than CPI for several years in a row.

The cost shift is also resulting in reductions in necessary infrastructure expenditure. The VFF is particularly concerned about reduced expenditure maintaining road and bridge infrastructure. Our verbal submission highlighted concerns with the relatively high rate of deaths of farmers due to road traffic accidents.

Almost one in four farmer road deaths occur within five kilometres of home. These statistics place high importance on the quality of local roads in rural Victoria. The Royal Automobile Club of Victoria last week released a report into Victoria's rural road network and stated that as many as 100 road deaths could be prevented each year if rural roads were made safer (media release, 26/11/03). The VFF recently provided a detailed submission on these matters to the Parliament of Victoria Road Safety Committee inquiry into the country road toll.

Farm safety awareness activities are not a core role or function of local government and should not be imposed on them by the central government.

That being said, responsible local government authorities can determine their own priorities based on the identified needs of their communities. Where regional farm safety strategies and activities are promoted by the farm sector, VFF Branches or Farm Safety Action Groups are in a position to apply to local government for assistance as appropriate.

Yours sincerely,


Clay Manners
General Manager Policy