



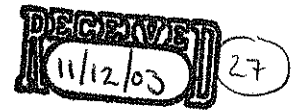
GANNAWARRA
SHIRE COUNCIL
ABN 98 993 182 937

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3 December 2003

Rural and Regional Services
and Development Committee
Level 8, 35 Spring Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000



Dear Committee Members,

Re: Submission – Fatalities and Injuries on Victorian Farms

Thank you for your letter dated 29 September 2003 seeking a submission from Council into the Parliamentary Inquiry - Fatalities and Injuries on Victorian Farms. With 32% of the Gannawarra Shire Council's population employed in the agricultural industry, the issue of fatalities and injuries on our local farms is of significant concern to Council.

To prepare this submission, Council sought input from the Cohuna / Leitchville Branch and Kerang / Koondrook Branch of the United Dairyfarmers of Victoria, and the Kerang Branch and Eastern Mallee Branch of the Victorian Farmers Federation. Further, Council conducted a Briefing Session relating to On-Farm Safety on 29 October 2003. The following is a summary of the information collected by Council to submit to the Inquiry:

Local farmer groups believe that education rather than regulation is the key to improving farm safety. The local Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE campus provide Farm Safety courses and these courses should be further enhanced and promoted to the farming community. The Kerang Campus of the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE and Workcover are also currently involved in a program of farm workplace safety audits including tractors, machinery, silos, shearing sheds and chemical storage.

No farm accident is a deliberate accident. Farmers are aging and there is no incentive for family members to take-over the running of the family farm. Local groups believe the average age of dairyfarmers in the Shire is 57 and the average age of dryland farmers is 55. Income of other occupations lures young people away from farms and the income return margin is so low that a farm can no longer support more than one family. The "old" farmer rarely has off-farm investments or the capital to purchase a home off-farm so stays on and continues to run the family farm working very long hours.

The age factor affects reflexes and makes accidents more likely to occur, particularly when dealing with machinery. The older farmer is also not able to think as quick as a young person. They have also done things the same way for so many years that change is not easily accepted. The reduced income means there is often no assistance available to perform tasks that may be better performed by two people. This places farmers at risk.

Farmers generally cannot afford changes necessary under mandatory laws regarding machinery, buildings, eg. shearing sheds, etc. Thousands of dollars cannot be found to meet these regulations. Agriculture is governed by world prices, dollar value, etc. income is out of the hands of farmers and this stifles the chance of having a guaranteed income. Money is therefore difficult to set aside to make improvements required by occupational health and safety regulations. During transitional stages of introduction of new technology and standards, Government subsidies like the roll over bar subsidy need to be available for farmers to meet the improvements. A realistic approach must be taken and allow farmers to meet standards required within a reasonable time.

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■ CORPORATE SERVICES OFFICE ■ 23 King Edward Street Cohuna 3568 ■ Telephone: (03) 5456 5222 ■ Fax: (03) 5456 2173 ■
■ CLIENT SERVICES OFFICE ■ 49 Victoria Street Kerang 3579 ■ Telephone: (03) 5450 9333 ■ Fax: (03) 5450 3023 ■
email: council@gannawarra.vic.gov.au

Address All Correspondence to the Chief Executive Officer, P.O. Box 252 Cohuna 3568

Achievable timelines to meet risk assessment and quality assurance standards should be set rather than pressuring for immediate compliance as is currently the case. This would assist the farmer greatly. Priority improvements could be listed and Worksafe or other controlling and monitoring bodies notified when a standard has been met. It would be beneficial if incentives for early compliance were made available as all groups consulted indicated this would lead to early adoption.

Local farmer groups also felt that farming is no more dangerous than other occupations even though statistics show differently. Most farmers do their best to be safe but at times accidents occur. Doing a job just slightly different once when dealing with machinery can have dire consequences.

Children on farms has been raised as an issue in recent times to the extent where farmers were told that children were no longer able to work on the farm. How will they learn the safe way to do things if their parents and grandparents do not coach them from an early age. If children grow up doing things in a safe way, safe practices are more likely to stay with them throughout life and therefore limit farm accidents in the future.

I have attached for your information two locally produced documents on this topic:

1. "Danger on our farms" produced by the farm injury and illness surveillance program of the Murray-Plains Division of General Practice.
2. "Farm Safety...what are you doing about it?" produced by Workcover in conjunction with the Murray-Plains Division of General Practice.

Again, on behalf of Council I thank you for providing Council and the local community with the opportunity to input into the Inquiry and should further information be required please do not hesitate to contact me on 03 5450 9353.

Yours faithfully,



DES BILSKE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER.

Encl.