

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Warrnambool – 10 March 2004

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Witness

Mr N. Symons, Farmer.

The CHAIR — Welcome again! We still have some members of the public here for the more informal part of our proceedings where we take some comments from the floor.

I wish to advise everybody present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee inquiring into the causes of fatalities and injuries on Victorian farms. If you wish to speak, I will acknowledge you and can you come up to the table. Then please state your name and address before making your remarks. If you could please keep your comments as brief as possible and to the point, that would be great. The committee members will take note of your comments, but in general will not ask questions. It is a public hearing and your comments will be recorded and included in the transcript of the hearing, which will become a public document. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. Any obvious errors of fact or grammar may be corrected, but not matters of substance.

Please come forward and state your full name and address.

Mr SYMONS — I am Neville Symons of 18 Kimberley Road, Warrnambool. I have been a farmer for in excess of 40 years. I am not privy to the conditions or material that you are seeking. I did have a look the other night through the computer, but we did not go into it. Anyway, just reflecting on some comments that have been passed here in relation to what Max just said about underground powerlines, to start with, the regulation, as far as I can recall, is that a powerline is required to be 60 centimetres below the ground. To start with, the depth is not deep enough, because most fence posts these days are driven in approximately a metre, and a strainer post possibly 4 feet into the ground. Any line below that level, sure enough it will always be where you were going to put that post in. So the problem is the depth, which I think may be a state regulation — it may vary in other states. In relation to Telstra lines, they do intrude onto private property as well, and I know that their depth is somewhat deeper than that.

So I am not sure with this inquiry as to what everyone is seeking. You are drawing a very long bow from here to Parliament House when it comes to farm safety, because there are so many variables each day. I have had people come from the city to my farm, and I can tell you this: that with people who own four-wheel-drive vehicles, in a tight situation an adult does not even know how to put the vehicle into four-wheel drive. I have people come from the city and built-up areas who do not know how to open the gate correctly or where to stand when opening a gate. If they come into the sheepyards when you are working with stock, they do not know where to stand, and there is potential for injury.

I know now that there is legislation in relation to four-wheel ATV motorbikes; and it is a good thing that we have programs from various outlets that are training young people to handle motorbikes. My son behind me has been riding a four-wheel motorbike since he was four years old. He is proficient at it and has never had one incident — not one! The danger lies with outsiders coming to a property, people who are unfamiliar with the surroundings or the potential for injury. People do not realise it is the potential of what can happen. I had an instance one time where a chap came out from Warrnambool with a friend. He was riding down the laneway and put the bike into a post in the laneway. He had 100 metres to apply the brakes, but failed to do so. Luckily he hit the post; otherwise he would have been decapitated by the barbed wire. The bikes were just there and were taken, unbeknown to us.

In the farming enterprise there is such a wide range of safety issues that crop up each day. I mean, just repairing a fence you need safety glasses and gloves and all that sort of thing. You have to muster livestock. You have to know how to handle bulls, for example, and know what they can do potentially and be able to handle stock in stockyards. Even sheep can be quite dangerous animals. It is not that they are large, but there are things that can happen. There are just so many variables to be addressed that it really makes me wonder how we can really address the problem 100 per cent. With the declining population in rural areas, it is a bit of a problem out there. There is electrical apparatus that we use, and a lot of mechanical equipment and that sort of thing. A lot of general knowledge has to be known. Even using a ladder, a chainsaw or that type of thing, it all comes down to experience. I am not privy to all the records and that, but unfortunately we farmers tend to do a lot of work on our own and accidents can happen just out of the blue. The potential is just there all the time.

That is about it, I think. I could probably talk for hours. Like I said, I think we are drawing a very long bow because there are just so many variables out there, really. It is a bit like when my wife was taught to drive a car, for example. When I was taught to drive a car, when I was little — and it was a manual vehicle and Harry Ferguson

designed the Safety Start System — the first thing that I was taught to do when operating a geared vehicle, not automatic, before you hit the starter motor is put your foot on the clutch. It is the very first thing that you do. You try to get some city people to do that. If the vehicle happens to be left in gear, they will go straight through the wall, won't they?

When you are looking into everything, there are just so many variables. It is unfortunately it is very hard to get farmers to come along to anything. Possibly if you had this function today at the field days you would have hundreds of people to put comment to you — but it might take hours, too.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.