CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms
Modewarre – 9 March 2004

Members
Mr M. P. Crutchfield
Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell
Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr P. L. Walsh

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff
Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witness
Mr G. Prince (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome! Thank you for taking the time and showing the interest to come along to our public hearing. Under powers conferred by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to call evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present 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 that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence on the inquiry into causes of fatality and injury on Victorian farms. I welcome our first witness, Graeme Prince. For the purpose of the transcript would you please state your full name and address.

Mr PRINCE — My full name is Graeme Edward Prince, and I reside at 140 Tannis Road, Larpent.

The CHAIR — Are you attending as an individual, in your own capacity?

Mr PRINCE — Yes, I am.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Could you please make a statement or make some preliminary comments for 5 or 10 minutes, then the committee will ask you some questions about your evidence.

Mr PRINCE — I have prepared a submission, and I assume everyone has a copy.

The CHAIR — Yes, thank you.

Mr PRINCE — Chair, committee members and staff, I thank you for the opportunity to address this public hearing into the cause of fatalities and injuries on Victorian farms.

As I stated, my name is Graeme Prince. I have been a dairy farmer for over 40 years. I have been actively interested and involved in farm safety since 1985 when I accepted an invitation to attend a meeting hosted by the then Department of Labour and Industry and the Tractor Manufacturers Association on tractor safety at Werribee. Since then the most positive outcome of tractor safety has been the rollover protection safety campaign, which resulted in legislation requiring the compulsory fitting of rollover protection structures to all tractors. This action has resulted in an extremely positive reduction of fatalities as a consequence of tractor rollovers. It is now evident that the major cause of fatalities from tractor accidents is run-overs. Run-overs occur usually where the tractor operator gets caught getting on or off a moving tractor, and is therefore run over by the back wheels. In my submission I discuss the design of safety tractor access platforms, cabin designs and power take-off (PTO) covers.

I have with me for your information copies of pamphlets showing safe tractor access platforms (STAPs). They are designed, illustrated and approved by Farmsafe Australia. Tractors on which these STAPs have been fitted are highly acclaimed by the tractor operators. The design of STAPs is such that the operator, if he or she slips or trips cannot be run over by the back wheels of the tractor. Unfortunately I have observed that some manufacturers of new tractors are still not applying to the standard of STAPs that I consider to be safe.

In reference to cabin interior design my main concern is the positioning of gear levers, steering wheels, hydraulic levers and seat design in some tractors. Gear levers positioned too far away from the seat require the operator to overstretch. Steering wheel adjustments in some steering wheels are not defined enough — for example, too much gap between lock positions. Hydraulic levers are too spread out across the panel; in some designs it is over a metre.

There is the issue of seat design. Arm rests are too low, requiring the driver to lean extensively. Seats are not swivelling adequately preventing easy viewing of attached implements, and sometimes the seats are too bouncy — that is, suspension. I do emphasise, however, that these concerns of mine do not apply to all tractors.

PTO covers have been a problem for a long time. It seems difficult for the tractor designers and manufacturers to come up with a PTO cover that is easy and quick to remove and replace when servicing and attaching or detaching equipment. All my above concerns with regard to tractor designs are aggravated by the long hours many farmers put in for tractor use. The economic pressures of farming today are such that farmers in many cases cannot find and/or afford to employ appropriate labour to ease the workload. Being tired and fatigued lessens the farmer’s or operator’s concentration to operate dangerous machinery sharply enough.
There is the issue of front-end loader education and operator registration. In the early 1990s there was a requirement for farmers to hold a front-end loader operator’s licence, which was a nationally accredited licence. At present there is in place a certificate of competency available, which is not nationally recognised or compulsory to acquire, to operate a front-end loader. Unfortunately certificate of competency instruction is not delivered with a standard consistency, and is generally only delivered to people enrolled in agricultural training courses — that is, traineeships and new apprentices. In the early 1990s when farmers were required to hold a front-end loader operator licence many training programs were held across the state by recognised trainers to groups of farmers. These programs were an ideal opportunity for farmers to be instructed in correct front-end loader usage and cover all safety aspects. During this time I arranged for over 400 farmers to participate in the front-end loader operators licence course.

Questions to be asked in relation to the use of ATVs on farms include: are they too powerful? In my opinion they are. Should they have ROPS frames on them? No, I do not believe so. Should operators be trained in their use? Currently they are given an instruction video manual when a new ATV is purchased, but operators are not specifically trained in their use. Should helmets be worn at all times? Yes, but a redesign is required, and I can show you a couple of illustrations here in a minute. Should children be allowed to operate ATVs or ride in tandem on them? No, but they do. How do you stop them? ATVs have become a very widely used and accepted piece of farm equipment. With the wider use and adoption of ATVs as a necessary piece of farm equipment has come a greater incidence of farm accident and fatalities. Farming practices are now such that farmers will not operate without them, so it is probably appropriate that designers and manufacturers consider their design applications with the cause and effect of accidents that they have investigated. I think the areas of design that ought to be revisited include the wheel base, width, centre of gravity, suspension and the other use of equipment on and with the ATVs — for example, spray tanks, tool boxes and towed implements.

With suicides and farm fatalities, we need to ask: what is a farm fatality, and what is a suicide? Attached are three pages of statistics applicable to the years 1991 to 2001. They speak for themselves; however, I wonder how many farm fatalities are actually suicides. This is the current helmet and the other is the prototype of the New Zealand Aghat for ATVs.

Mr Ingram — For the record, why do we need to get the new model out?

Mr Prince — The current model helmets are too heavy and clumsy, for a start, for rounding up cows and that sort of stuff — and they are hot. Whereas the New Zealand models are a lot lighter. I think they withstand a 55-kilometre-per-hour crash. I am not 100 per cent sure on it, but I am pretty sure of that.

Mr Ingram — How do we encourage the use of helmets? Historically farmers and other people who work and live on farms are reluctant to use basic safety equipment regularly, so how do you get the message through that helmets are essential to be worn?

Mr Prince — I think we have to push it more because of the size of it and the weight of it. I think that is the biggest determining factor now and why farmers do not use them — because they are too big and clumsy and heavy. If you come off, the weight of it is more likely to snap your neck than not having one on. That also goes for peaks on helmets too.

Mr Crutchfield — On that theme, do the New Zealand helmets meet the Australian standards; have they been approved yet?

Mr Prince — No, not yet. It is being done.

Mr Crutchfield — What are the time lines for that?

Mr Prince — I am not sure of the time lines at the present stage.

The Chair — Would you suggest any improvements to that particular helmet or do you think that would be just about it?

Mr Prince — I have thought about this and I consider that it should have a brim around it for sun protection as well. I am also chair of a committee of Farmsafe Victoria. We have as a member a Dr Greg Keogh who suggested at the last meeting that some of the biggest problems with helmets are the peaks because when a
person goes over the front they dig in and snap the person’s neck. That is what we have to get away from. If we had a softer brim on it all the way around, giving protection from the sun, we can hope to alleviate the problem of broken necks. This is the first time I have seen that helmet myself. I have been trying to get one for four years now.

**The CHAIR** — We have seen a couple of different examples.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — You said that ATVs are too powerful and that you do not believe they need ROPS. Can you explain why they do not need ROPS?

**Mr PRINCE** — I will go to the too-powerful bit first. I believe there is a motorbike out now with 700 cc under it.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Would you restrict the size of the engine?

**Mr PRINCE** — I have one myself that is 350 cc — and that is plenty big enough. As for the ROPS frames, I believe in some cases they are a good idea, but how many broken necks and head bashings are you going to get with a ROPS that goes over? What is the design of it going to be and will the manufacturers say, ‘Hey, you put a ROPS on it’. Does it become null and void then? That is a problem with it.

**The CHAIR** — As a practising farmer, do you have any views on insurance premium discount schemes and providing incentives for OHS compliance by farmers and how large the premium discount would have to be to make such a scheme viable?

**Mr PRINCE** — I do not know. You would have to see Worksafe for that one. There has to be a carrot there somewhere for farmers to do it. The biggest problem is that farmers are getting older now and younger farmers have not come up through the system because of economic conditions. I think that is one of our biggest problems. We had a gap in the late 1960s, when the average age was 55 or 60 and then it went back to 35 or 40 — overnight, sort of thing. I think we are at that stage now. Another problem is falling from heights. You get the older fellows up the windmills and things. They are not as nimble as they were 30 years ago, but they think they can still do it and they drop off.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Just following on from what Craig was asking about the helmets, how do you think we can ensure that we will get a take-up on farmers using them and stop them saying, ‘We’ve done it this way without a helmet, so she’ll be right’?

**Mr PRINCE** — I suppose it is like it anything else, if it is comfortable to wear you would wear it. Maybe it has to be legislated that you wear a helmet, but a helmet or something like that has to be comfortable to wear. I think comfort is the key factor here. If it is comfortable, they will wear it. It is so similar to the new Country Fire Authority helmets. They are comfortable to wear — you just wear them.

**Mr INGRAM** — If we can get the new Aghats to meet the Australian standards, should those hats come with all ATVs?

**Mr PRINCE** — Definitely.

**Mr INGRAM** — They should just be part of it when you go in and buy it?

**Mr PRINCE** — Yes, you get one automatically.

**Mr INGRAM** — You raised a number of questions that need answers and you have given your views on those questions. Obviously we are going to try to come up with some solutions to some of the questions that you asked and some others. What role do you see in the legislative and regulatory process, education and enforcement in trying to find some solutions? We have been told by a number of people that the last thing we should do is try to bring in legislation because farmers just do not like having the government telling them what to do. Once we identify a problem and find a potential solution how do we go about encouraging producers to use those new mechanisms?

**Mr PRINCE** — I think it has to be done through education. Especially with ATVs, we are getting more and more what our professional farmers are calling hobby farmers and they are getting bikes and tractors and that. They have no experience of a bike whatsoever and they buy a bike, jump on it and away they go. Maybe there
should be an instructional system there for them. Certainly kids under the age of 18 should have instructions if they
get a motorbike or an ATV. I think that would go a fair way towards education. Certainly the education could come
through the VFF or those farmer organisations.

Mr INGRAM — In talking about the ATVs particularly it is not only the fatality rate, there is also a large
number of serious accidents. The fatalities seem to be in the older or younger age groups. Are you from the Colac
district?

Mr PRINCE — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — What is the level of serious accidents on ATVs in the region?

Mr PRINCE — One problem we do have is that they are not registered. Maybe we should be looking at
the hospitals or doctors and saying, ‘Hey, register all serious accidents’. I spoke before of Dr Greg Keogh. Up in
the mid-Murray they have done some work and they have a register of all the serious accidents. Fatalities are
automatically registered, but serious accidents are not. I have been speaking to people and it comes down to the
question of what is the difference between each bike. As I said before, are the wheelbase, the centre of gravity, and
the suspension different? I am not sure. I do not know.

Mr INGRAM — That is more of a problem in steep country, is it not? On flatter country — —

Mr PRINCE — Not necessarily so. If you get a high-gravity bike and go hooning around a corner you
can clock 55 kilometres an hour going up a track.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I have one other question regarding safe tractor access. Could you expand on
that? Are you saying that some manufacturers — —

You assert here that most major fatalities now — I know there was another accident at the weekend, but I do not
know the details of it — are from run-overs.

Mr PRINCE — Yes.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Can you expand on that? It is unclear what you mean — that is, that there are
some manufacturers that are not complying to the STAP guidelines?

Mr PRINCE — I have observed brand new tractors at field days with steps going up leading to the cabs. I
would get a gas axe and cut them off; they should not be there. There are two in particular. I do not know if you
want them mentioned, but there are two in particular that — —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am happy for you to mention the names.

Mr PRINCE — Ford and Massey Ferguson are the worst two out of the lot that I have seen. They have
one single bar down with bars across it, and the wheel is not covered in.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — So they do not solve the access issue; they make it worse.

Mr PRINCE — No. The Fent is probably the best one out of the lot. It is a German machine. I still reckon
there is a lot to be desired there.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Graeme, for giving us your time today and for your insights into
safety issues on farms. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. Any obvious errors of fact and
grammar can be corrected, but not matters of substance. Once again thank you.

Witness withdrew.