CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Melbourne – 21 January 2004

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Associate Professor L. Fragar, Director, Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome. I will not go through the powers of the committee because I know you were here yesterday. I ask the executive officer to administer either the oath or affirmation. Could you please give us your full name and address?

Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR — My full name is Lynette Joyce Fragar. My residential address is Kurraian, Delungra, New South Wales.

The CHAIR — Are you here today in a private capacity or representing an organisation?

Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR — I am here today as the director of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety.

The CHAIR — The evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Could you please make a presentation to us over the next 10 minutes or so; we will have questions after that.

Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR — What I plan to do is to briefly speak to some of the material that I have just now provided you with; I apologise that I was not able to get it to the committee earlier than this morning.

The first page there is background to myself and my experience. I have been the head of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety for the past decade. That centre is a research and development centre that is mostly involved in applied research and development of resources to assist the people who live and work in agriculture to achieve improved health and safety status. We have been undertaking a range of research activities. We have worked closely with the particular commodity groups — the agricultural industry groups — to define the key hazards of high risk for their industries and to develop risk management resources to assist their member farmers to be able to better manage occupational health and safety risk. In addition we have been funded by and large by agricultural industries nationally through the various commodity R and D organisations to undertake studies and investigations into specific hazards of high risk that tend to be common across the various commodity production systems; recognising that the hazards associated with dairy and milk production can be quite different to the hazards associated with cotton growing — there are significant differences, but there are some areas where there are common issues that need to have attention.

A number of the issues that you have been hearing about and dealing with are currently the subject of reference group work of Farmsafe Australia. In particular there is a farm safety machinery safety reference group currently convened which next week will consider reports into the best strategies relating to tractor run-over, PTO injury, grain auger injury and post-hole digger injury. There is currently a reference group which is examining the problems of ATV deaths in Australia. That has only been meeting more recently. Its deliberations have not been finalised, but some of the material that is emerging I will be considering in the document that you have here.

I will briefly touch on all of the items that are the subject of your investigation, but want to focus mostly on what needs to be done to actually achieve improvement. I guess I would be a bit unusual as a head of a research organisation in saying that although I think investment from government could be made, as has happened in some other countries, in investing in the research industry, I do not think that is going to return for agriculture in Australia the best return at this stage. I think there is enough known about the solutions to a number of the hazards of high risk for us to actually make good progress and improvement if there is a political will, if there is an industry will and if there is an agreement to reduce the amount of confusion that is going on currently about a number of those issues. That is where I want to end up in the presentation that I make.

I have no special knowledge of Victoria. Our work has been Australia-wide and industry-wide, so please excuse my lack of knowledge particularly of how say Worksafe Victoria may be operating or how your government is actually dealing with and seeing these issues.

On page 2 I briefly talk about the main causes of fatality and injury on farms. Over on pages 3 and 4 I have listed from one of our research reports the agents of fatal incident across Australia. While that is old data in terms of the deaths having occurred from 1989 to 1992, by and large that is the most comprehensive complete capture of all deaths that have occurred in agriculture in Australia that has ever been undertaken. Actual coronial files were pulled out in all states and a very intensive examination was made of each of those deaths. The main changes that have occurred since that period relate to a reduction in tractor rollover deaths in Victoria as a result of the rollover protective structures (ROPS) retrofitment campaign, an increase in the number of deaths from ATVs, and along with that a reduction in the number of deaths from two-wheeled motorcycles. If you look on page 3 at the total number of deaths, farm vehicles are high in the total number of deaths. You can see there that at that stage there were 24 deaths relating to two-wheeled motorcycles in that four-year period and only 4 for four-wheeled...
motorcycles. That has now changed. We are now seeing probably around 10 ATV deaths per annum across Australia, as best we can gauge accessing the coronial data system and receiving reports from newspaper clippings and so forth.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Is that 46 for aircraft correct?

**Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR** — Yes, that is. Bear in mind that this is Australia-wide and they relate to accidents that cause deaths occurring on farms — sometimes they were planes dropping out of the sky. However, you can see there that the 46 were workers. They include where a group of farmers were travelling by fixed-wing aircraft to do something; a couple of such injuries occurred. Bear in mind that it covers Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland and so those cases are in that. We have not been focusing to date on that because air safety is a matter of other agencies.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — It is an extraordinary number compared to the others.

**Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR** — Some of them are crop-duster-type deaths. You then have a group of 122 under mobile farm machinery and plant with a large proportion of those relating to tractors. They are with other mobile plant and machinery. I do not want to focus too much, but you have guns, rifles, shotguns — they have tended to decline since our gun legislation has occurred.

Then you go over to farm structures. By far the big one for children there relates to drowning in dams, creeks and rivers. That is the large group in that. Among the animals, across Australia there is horse-related injury. A good proportion of those deaths were work related and that has been a problem. From 1989 to 1992 they were the key causes of fatalities.

On page 5 I note from the same publication how Victoria fits with other states in terms of rates. You can see on page 5 that on a rate of per 100 000 workers Victoria looks pretty good by comparison to other states. If you go over the page Victoria still looks pretty good if you do it on a per 10 000 farm establishments, but it is not quite as remarkably good. This is a bit to do with the funny ways that data is gathered or not gathered and some variability in terms of the numerated data — how you measure the total number of people working in agriculture has always been difficult. Farm women tend to under-report themselves so there is a great deal of variability. For that reason we have also used another measure which is per 10 000 farms to give us another way of looking at it. Neither of them is particularly good or accurate.

I have provided you with copies of the Victoria state section of that deaths report, but would just draw your attention to the table on page 10 which is the agent of fatal incident for Victoria by comparison to the table that I just walked you through which related to Australia as a whole. By and large there remain a large number of hazards associated with death on Victorian farms. I think that is of importance when you look at the whole range of things that are causing farmers and farm workers to die. I believe this is part of the problem as to why agriculture sits in such a position in relation to other industries. Farmers and farm workers are faced with a multiplicity of hazards of high risk in the course of the work they do. If you think about the transport industry, basically it is their vehicle, the road and a range of things that people can point to including fatigue, alcohol and speed and whatever. Whereas with agriculture we are faced with this whole range of hazards, let alone the human factors that relate to the age of operators, the way they have learnt their trade, business or profession — all of those sorts of things — and the family nature of the farm business. We have a far more complex working environment where farmers and farm workers are faced with a far more complex array of hazards, each of which needs to be addressed. I think that is one of the key reasons we are in this particular dilemma that we are faced with and why we share a common objective of trying to do something about it. I will leave the rest of that section relating to Victoria for your committee to consider.

If you go over to page 16, other ways of looking at farm injury which I think you have already had presentations about relate to the hospital data. You can see Victorian hospital separations for selected on-farm injury listed there. I think you are well served in Victoria with the data that can be generated by the Monash University Accident Research Centre that other states do not have. Victoria has a far better system of emergency department reporting than exists in any other state — no other state has the attention to attempting to get injury data from the emergency departments as occurs in Victoria. I think you should be pushing MUARC to exploit the data you have there as best as is possible because it does not exist in other centres.

You also have workers compensation claims that are available to us. There is good data available in terms of telling us about the size and scale of the problem on the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission web site.
At any time you can pull that down and have a look at that. It is probably the most up-to-date publicly available data set. None of those data sets can do other than tell us about the scale of the problem and a broad statement about the nature of the problem. Those databases are not there to tell us about how injuries occurred. A lot of people tend to think those data sets should be delivering prevention data. They cannot do that; that is not what they are there to do. They are set up to provide information for people for other purposes. I really think if we try to set up databases that will answer every question it would be money thrown at something that would be hugely costly and would not deliver because it could not — that is not the purpose of those databases. Sure, some databases can be made better — your emergency department databases with text fields about what went wrong can provide far more than what is currently available. I think the moves that are being made with hospital data in Victoria are to be commended and should be supported. There should be work done to make sure that the data that comes out from there is available to the agricultural industries to help in monitoring and better defining what the problem is, in a timely way.

However, all of that aside, as I say, I think there is enough known for us to make significant improvements if we have a will to do it. Over on page 18 I briefly list some of the factors that I think are associated and, out of our experience of working with industry and observing how work health authorities variously work across Australia, some of the factors that are associated with the high rates of injury and death that relate to other industries. I have already spoken about the hazardous production processes and the wide range of hazards that are faced, and the multiple tasks and processes and skills that are needed to maintain safety for those. There are certain production factors that are out of control of the farm manager and the organisation — environmental conditions relating to weather. Environmental conditions often mean you have to get a job done because the weather is coming in or something has happened — you have a pest problem — which means there is an immediacy about a job that needs to be done. To that extent farmers are tending to do what it takes to get the job done rather than to say as a highest priority safety is the first thing that matters here and now. If farmers sit back and look at it, basically it has been my experience that where we have had informed farmers they are very committed to safety, but in the immediacy of the problem of getting a job done it is a different matter because you have to get the job done and oftentimes the weather, labour availability and other things that crop up in terms of prices and that which are all out of control are all factors that mean that safety sort of sits back in the immediacy of those sorts of issues.

The way that agriculture is organised in terms of them being family businesses with variable employment arrangements, the difficulty of getting labour, variability in the skills of the labour they can employ are also important. The background about how farmers learnt their profession is really important. As I grew up as a farmer’s daughter I learnt about sheep production, I learnt about fine wool, I learnt about shearing, I learnt about how to control for lice and blowfly strike, but I did not learn about safe systems. That was not part of the way that I learnt my business. With all the folk that has been pretty much the same. Basically it was, ‘Be sensible, use your commonsense, do not take risks’, but there was nothing in it that was aligned with the contemporary occupational health and safety systems that say, ‘Create safe work systems and then do what it takes to operate safely within those safe work systems’. That was not the way we learnt. Some people used their commonsense better than others and some people actually put money into equipment and facilities that were safer, but by and large that has not been the way we have learnt how to do it. Therefore occupational health and safety has not been budgeted into production costs as will have happened in other big industries and other more organised industries.

The other thing is I think the contemporary occupational health and safety regulatory arrangements are complicated for family businesses and the complexity of tasks that farmers face. I am not critical of the occupational health and safety regulatory systems for other industries. I think they work well; I have sat in the health industry and I have sat in the university industry and they operate well: there is a requirement to have safety committees and safety officers and identify your hazards and learn from your injury experience. All of that works in that sense and it is important to have those processes. However, when I sit as a farmer, as a single family unit, those systems do not make a great deal of sense — to have processes that are largely dependent on showing paper trail that you have those systems in place. Where I sit there I really what to know what is it I need to do so that this process is safe and what is it that is required of me to protect workers that I employ in that system. I do not think we have been sending those clear signals to farming businesses.

My sixth point there is the signals we are sending and that farmers receive are confused. They are confused in terms of the regulatory requirements. They are confused in the way that work health authorities around Australia implement those — sometimes they seem as though they are going to be strong on something and then it all sort of falls back. We have just gone through a process in New South Wales with the ROPS retrofitment scheme where there was a clear intention of the Workcover authority in New South Wales to do compliance, to have ROPS at the end of the ROPS retrofitment and it did not happen. Farmers now are thinking, ‘Did they really mean it?’. There
were so many words, but in fact there was no result in terms of the compliance component. Then it can be seen that work health authorities have taken a particular farmer to court on an issue on which every other farmer has said, ‘I have got that; why did that person get pinged’ — to be colloquial — ‘for that particular instance, and picked up?’ There are very confused messages both in terms of what is required and how it is enforced. There is no consistency of enforcement. I cannot speak specifically for Victoria, but my observation from around Australia is that it is variable. There has been pretty much a lack of determination to do a consistent compliance program for agreed issues. It is not good for agriculture if that is in fact happening.

The other area where there are mixed and complex signals is actually in the marketplace where there are no incentives in terms of insurance premiums, or whatever else, for people who are doing well in small family businesses. Both for workers compensation claims and also for claims made under personal accident and public liability, claims appear to be settled by the insurance industry where the person whose business it was cannot understand why a claim was settled because it does not appear to be logical or sensible. But in the insurance industry it seems the cheaper way to do it is to not defend the particular claim.

There are not good market signals either in terms of the true cost of occupational health and safety management. The people who are performing well and doing the right things are not getting back that recognition. Those are important factors, some of which have elements that can be addressed, many of which do not.

Over the page, in terms of the strategic approaches that are based on some evidence for what should work I have listed four areas we have been considering. A lot has been said in the first area of creating a culture of safety. I think we have done that. Now the best return will come from doing and that will continue to change the culture and improve the way people think about it.

There has been a huge amount of media coverage and work done with young people, local groups and farm women. The Farmsafe organisation has been working throughout its life — it is now 10 years old — on that sort of work. I personally do not think there is a great deal more to be gained by investing in that area.

Two broad areas need to be looked at. The first relates in the long term to ensuring farm businesses better manage their occupational health and safety risk, and they relate to items 2 and 3 about education and ensuring that farmers have their occupational health and safety risk management resources. That is the work Farmsafe Australia has been doing with the development of the occupational health and safety risk management kit that is commodity specific and is promoted in the managing farm safety course training program. The big issue there is to get an incentive that will drive farmers to get to the course and, secondly, to ensure what they have learnt in terms of the necessary knowledge is translated into action.

At the moment that is working best in the cotton industry in New South Wales. New South Wales Workcover has a premium discount scheme for small business which we were able to present to the cotton industry in New South Wales. We have 150 cotton farmers who are part of that scheme. Those 150 cotton farmers have done the managing cotton farm safety course. They have implemented the program and put in place those systems on their farms, and they are receiving a 10 per cent reduction in their workers compensation premiums for demonstrating that they meet the requirements of proper occupational health and safety risk management.

This was a huge shift. They are family businesses; the small business and not the big boys — the corporates. These cotton farms are family businesses. They have had to make a dramatic shift in the way they look at occupational health and safety. They have implemented the resources their industry R and D corporation has funded. They have implemented those programs on their farms and they are now managing their occupation and health and safety risk in as best manner as is possible for them.

That process needs incentive, like a premium discount scheme for other agencies or other industries where there are significant workers compensation premiums involved, but there are other family businesses where that is not so. We need to be looking and finding other carrots, if you like, for farmers in the more family-based businesses with lesser employees in order to do something about that.

It is interesting to note that in horticulture the quality assurance requirements are starting to pull a lot of the horticulture businesses into these programs. The requirements for Europe gap, to meet the market requirements for entry of products into the European markets, is starting to demand attention to worker health and safety. Farmsafe Australia has been able to negotiate with the people who are developing the Australians standards for Europe gap to ensure that there is consistency. The people who have been doing this in horticulture will be able to meet the
Europe gap requirements. Other commercial enterprises that are requiring quality and occupational health and safety standards, like Unilever and whatever, are also interested in this sort of approach.

That is one important area we need to grapple with to define and identify. At the moment Farmsafe Australia is working with a RIRDC-funded project — that is, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation — to define where those market opportunities might rest and to see if we can exploit every possibility.

In New South Wales when loans are being renegotiated we are also starting to see bank managers inquiring about how occupational health and safety risk is being managed, so there is also an increasing expectation that occupational health and safety risk needs to be managed as well. But in the shorter term I think we should be doing more campaign-type work for key hazards. Where possible those need to focus on the higher order controls of engineering design type so that with those issues I spoke about where farmers are busy and on an immediate basis just need to get a job done, those controls are there and in place. If you depend on behavioural controls, given the scatter of agriculture across the state and Australia, the necessary levels of self-discipline of supervision of enforcement that are required would be impossible to achieve generally unless there are very clear discrete things that people need to do.

On page 20 I have listed key hazards that have an on-farm intervention. Some of these are being considered and the evidence is being considered by groups such as the national child safety reference groups, which have paid it a lot of attention, and other expert groups. People are looking at the evidence to see if these will work. In others the machinery safety group is receiving reports with some evidence that this would work. There is clear evidence from the literature for some of the others.

If every farm introduced those on-farm interventions we would reduce by 40 per cent the number of deaths on Australian farms. We know there are lots of other odd things that happen, and there is another level that you could go — for example, I have not put in for electrical safety the RCDs in workshops — to address a range of other hazards that are less commonly occurring in terms of death.

For farm utility and vehicles there should be no passengers on the tray on the back of utilities and seatbelt restraint wearing should be mandatory on farms as well and not just put them on when you get to the farm gate, as we are inclined to do. Helmets for two-wheeled and four-wheeled vehicles and horses would significantly reduce the number of head-related injuries that are occurring among all those injuries we have reported. We acknowledge that at the moment with the current design of ATVs there does not appear to be an immediate engineering solution for the rollover part. On the other hand, no passengers on ATVs and helmets for head protection seem two immediate things that could be done with a will to do it. With tractor rollovers the ROPS is clear and you do not need convincing about that. With tractor run-over, no passengers and a safe access platform is being considered by the machinery group at the moment.

In other areas of high risk the maintenance of guards and the putting back of guards that are broken needs to be put in place. In terms of dams, rivers and creeks, the industry has now accepted that there should be separation of the farm home, where life and leisure occurs, from the farm workplace. It is something that is tangible, should be put in place, has benefit for children not just in relation to drowning in dams, creeks and irrigation channels but also in relation to a number of other hazards such as reversing vehicles, machinery and whatever. I have listed what I believe would be a set of interventions which, if everyone were committed to them, would achieve on the evidence available to us at the moment a clear reduction. If those were developed as minimum requirements it would be clear to work health authorities and their inspectors that this is what is needed, because at the moment I do not think they are particularly clear about what is necessary. It would be clear to farmers that these are things that they must pay attention to and that they should expect that they could be inspected and that if they were offending in these particular areas there could be adverse outcomes, either in terms of injury or a prosecution. It is two pronged: one is that in the longer term farmers and their enterprises need to better manage risks but in the immediate term if we actually get on and do these things, recognising that some things do not have solutions but some things do, and if we have a will to do it, then these are the things that need to be done.

Mr WALSH — I refer to the graphs on pages 5 and 6 of your submission. You said that the way the data was collected did not exactly make it right. Does that change the relativity of those numbers in terms of ranking between states? The numbers are not exact but the relativity is important.

Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR — In every measure you make Victoria comes out looking better. If you look at the current workers comp data, where they can get comparisons because within states they use different numbers of
days off before claims are made or whatever, but where NOHSC has used the same definitions for workers comp, Victoria always looks better.

**Mr WALSH** — It is the relativity that is usually more important than the exact number.

**Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR** — Victoria by and large is best performed. I have ideas why that is. It is probably to do with the nature of the industries. I think there is a more urban set of values among Victorian farmers about safety than there is in my state and in other states. These are not just issues to do with your ROPS campaign, which has been very successful, but the fact that you were the first state to have a ROPS campaign after the national safety campaign suggested is another flag indicating that this state leads in terms of work that needs to be done. It is my view that your investigation as a committee is another piece of evidence of that commitment, compared to other states.

**Mr WALSH** — You talked about the cultural stuff and the changes in the future. If you take the Land newspaper, which is one of your examples, every time you pick up a copy of it there is a photo of a champion farmer somewhere or the farm woman of the year sitting on an ATV with three dogs and her husband — and with no helmets. Does that reinforce the fact that we do not do things right? Should we have some form of code for the media which makes sure when it depicts these things it is depicted as being a correct way of doing it?

**Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR** — Far more work needs to be done. Our centre and Farmsafe have gone to the media council — I may have the actual name of that organisation wrong — and there has been an interest in doing better in terms of the images used by the media. The National Child Safety on Farms program in particular at the moment is active in that area. Anything that would reinforce the commitments it has made to doing it better would be valuable. Again, that is all part of these mixed messages that are being sent. There is not a strong commitment to doing what I consider to be just the basic things. I recognise some of them are hard. You say helmets when you need shade, but there are solutions to that — with a will to get it done that would be fixed up.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Have you any ideas or examples of programs in other states, whether they are similar programs to the ROPS on tractors or a training program, that have made a demonstrative difference in that state but not in Victoria? Are there any programs that Victoria can duplicate, if you like, or plagiarise?

**Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR** — It is not necessarily plagiarising. In Western Australia Farmsafe worked with its GIO to get some premium reductions for farmers who had done the managing farm safety course and who met certain other criteria, and that resulted in some increased uptake in it. Within the last couple of years in New South Wales a new occupational health and safety act and regulations have been introduced. Small business was exempt from some of the provisions of the regulations until September this year; in September those exemptions went out. Farmers were caught up in the scramble to make sure that everything was right by 1 September, erroneously believing they had to do something different from what had been in the act since 1983. But as a result of that the good spin-off was that we have had now something like 3000 farmers do the managing farm safety course within the last six months in New South Wales.

We are now in a position where probably 10 per cent of farms have received the information and the material. That is different from saying they have done anything about it. Any incentives that would come in addition to the Farmbis subsidy for the course need to provide the incentive at the point at which some action is taken on the farm, and not just doing the course. There needs to be some evidence back that they have done the course and not just gone back and caught up on the two days work they lost to do the course; they have taken it and done something in terms of their hazard identification and their business planning on how they are going to manage the risk. I do not think there are any other magic bullets around.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — You are a public health physician and you specialise in farm safety issues, but in the broader sense where would you rank investment in improving farm safety with other public health investments? For example, as a Parliament and a government you have to make decisions about whether you invest in road safety, reducing obesity in children, sun smart campaigns or increasing immunisation levels. You have to work out which are the best cost benefit, in terms of the total health of the community if you want to look at a public health focus. Bearing that in mind, where would you see investment in farm safety initiatives in terms of cost benefit versus reducing obesity in children, diabetes, cancer prevention, and immunisation rates, for example?

**Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR** — Clearly those issues, on a whole of population basis, are overwhelming and have to be dealt with, with significant investment. On the other hand I would like to take the focus that the health status of farmers and farm workers is significantly reduced compared to the Australian male population.
age-standardised proper measures of comparison, the death rate of male farmers and farm workers is significantly higher. The farming population is a sub-population of significant disadvantage. They are far more disadvantaged than rural populations, which we already know to be at disadvantage. In those areas of health, non-intentional injury — which is what we have been focusing on here — is one of those significant contributors, but it is not the only one. Some of the cancers, cardiovascular disease, suicide and road traffic injury are significant groups to make this population worthy, in a public health sense, of significant attention. Within that is the farm safety area.

Australian agriculture has indicated its own commitment to doing something about it by the significant investment that its commodity research and development corporation is already putting in place. They are already investing in the national farm injury data centre and the work that is done from programs of joint research that is funding the work of the Monash University Accident Research Centre and other researchers around the area. That is unprecedented world wide. This industry in Australia, given that it has had access to information, has turned itself around and said, ‘This is a significant issue for the wellbeing of our industry’. So at that level industry has signalled that it is committed. It has all sorts of problems when you get to the agri-political organisations in terms of whether the current incumbents really understand and are aware of it, but at the federal and industry levels there has been a systematic commitment to moving and improving and doing what is needed.

I think you will be meeting with the rural industry research and development corporation when you are in Canberra, and you will hear more about the joint research venture there. But it is not confined to the joint venture; the commodity organisations and outside of those are also investing. Government, from a public health perspective, needs also to be examining that commitment. For other populations of significant disadvantage in a public health sense, we invest. So for Aboriginal health, for the health of people in poorer socioeconomic conditions, we invest. This is a population that needs that investment, but it needs to be very carefully invested so we get a good return and do not just prop up a research industry for the sake of the research industry.

Dr NAPTHINE — Following that point, we know that there is this rural health disadvantage and specifically farm rural health, if you want to tag it that way, but we also know there is significant disadvantage in rural areas in terms of access to GPs, access to accident and emergency facilities and health facilities within the golden hour, and access to public dental services, for example, which has significant health implications. How important are those issues as compared with, say, a campaign to put helmets on people riding all terrain vehicles?

Assoc. Prof. FRAGAR — Those services are critically important; but do not depend on those to do the primary prevention. We have a problem that we have preventable injuries occurring at too high a rate. I am fully supportive of and recognise that we also need to have improved levels of services in rural areas. There has been a very good study done in Western Australia that looked at the impact on farming of declining services, and the impact on declining services of farming, and the restructuring that is going on in agriculture as well, and for those rural communities that are very dependent on agriculture, you have this vicious circle. A number of the declines are actually attributable to farmers making purchase decisions outside their local community, because if you have to buy a new heavy piece of equipment the cost advantage of buying it at the bigger centre can now be in the order of tens of thousands of dollars, so the cost of local loyalty is getting to be big.

The study showed that farmers are not just victims of declining services, but also that those declining services were significantly contributing to high levels of stress, mental ill health, and adverse outcomes in terms of whether farmers would go to health services when they needed to. So I am fully supportive of getting more doctors, more services and maintaining the infrastructure in the bush; but it is a bit of a chicken and egg sort of a thing as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time and making the submission today. It has been really worth while. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight, and any obvious errors of fact or grammar may be corrected, but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.