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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Witnesses
Mr M. A. Clutterbuck (sworn); and
Mrs B. Clutterbuck.
The CHAIR — Welcome, Max and Brenda. You were here for the preliminaries before so we will skip them. Max, for the purposes of the transcript, could you give your full name and address? You are presenting in a private capacity today, I believe?

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — Yes. My full name is Maxwell Arthur Clutterbuck. My postal address is Box 815, Hamilton 3300. I am an individual as far as this goes. I am a retired farmer and fencing contractor.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. If you would speak to us for 5 or 10 minutes, we will ask you questions after that.

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — My concern is for underground electric cables around farms — around buildings in the area, from shed to shed and down to the dam and those sorts of places. I have been working as a fencing contractor and farmer for 30 years, using a hydraulic post driver and auger to dig the pilot holes for the posts. This act is hazardous, because you never know when you might strike an electric cable. Other earthworking people and farm workers experience the same problem. No cables are marked. There is a mud map in the meter box, which was put there 20 years ago, and it is unreadable in some cases. Some people know where the cables are, others think they know, and others do not know. Farms change hands and new owners have no idea where the cables are. The next generation is also at risk.

Because no signs were available on the market, we have designed one for the purpose, to be placed in various points around the farm to alert people of cable locations. A farm plan can be drawn up and filed for future use. The signs are made from aluminium material, with pressed lettering, and can be used on posts, fences, and shed walls and where cables are laid. Where animals graze and vehicles travel, a square concrete block with a marker attached can be placed in the ground. I would like to see some recommendation to address the problem.

I have a couple of experiences here. One fellow was asked to put a gateway near a house. He asked for the location of any cables, wires or pipes. The farmer said, ‘No, nothing here. She’s right. Get into it’. Anyway, he started digging and up came all this coloured wire on the auger. He went off at the farmer — he got a helluva fright and abused him no end. The farmer’s wife came out to see what was going on. He told her and she said, ‘Oh, I pulled the fuse before you came this morning’.

Another one was doing a job out at a property at Cavendish. He was boring a hole in the sheepyard with a little motorised auger, a hand-held sort of thing. He got all the holes done except one. He was about halfway or so down and he could not get it down any further. He thought it must be the roots of the trees. He scratched out the dirt and found it was a conduit he was trying to cut through. So he was lucky that the engine on the thing stalled. When the property owner came, he told him about it and he said, ‘Oh, I forgot about that one’. These things are around the farm and people forget about different ones.

There was another one out here. A bloke said to us, ‘Put this gateway down at the dam, down where the pump is’ — so he could get to it. He kept harping about the asbestos pipe and said, ‘Don’t you drive over that pipe there; you blokes will be in a lot of trouble if you do that’. He put us off our guard. Anyway, we put the gate in and fixed it up and all that. Next thing the pump started and we said, ‘Oh, wonder where the power came from for that?’. We looked and saw that we had missed it by only a few inches. The problem is there and something should be done about it. Sooner or later somebody is going to get zapped, as you might call it. That is about all I have.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Max. That is a great idea. I know that electrocutions are one of the major causes of death on farms and that should help us out a bit.

Dr NAPTHINE — Max, when a farmer or somebody puts an underground cable from their house to their shed or to the dairy, what are the current regulations? Do they have to notify the Chief Electrical Inspector?

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — No, they have got nothing to do with it. Once the power leaves the transformer off main line, goes through your property and the transformer is on the pole, and that is where Powercor finishes. What goes on in the farm, in and around the buildings, they can go anywhere with them.

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — And it is your responsibility to know where they are.

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — A lot of people, like new owners when properties change hands, come in and they have not got a clue where they are.
Dr NAPTHINE — Do you know anything about a recent incident in the Coleraine area where somebody dug through a telephone cable? Do you know anything about that incident?

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — We know it happened, but in Telstra’s case they do have their lines marked.

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — This one was not.

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — You are supposed to dial 1100 and find where it is, but you cannot do that with powerlines.

Dr NAPTHINE — So there is no number to ring for powerlines?

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — You could ring until you are blue in the face as far as round the farm is concerned, because what goes on there is up to the farmer. Farmers are pretty slack in a lot of ways, you know. They tend to say, ‘She’s right’, and forget about them. That is what we come up against all the time. We have been fencing for years.

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — We kept coming home and saying, ‘Something should be done about it’, so one afternoon I did. We have got a marker with us. Would you like to see it?

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — We made these things, and I have handed quite a few out to different people to get them to put them up. They say, ‘What a great idea!’, but you check up in a couple of weeks time to see whether they have put them up and they are still sitting on top of the fridge. They just do not get around to doing it.

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — That is it. Do you want it handed around?

The CHAIR — Yes, thank you.

With powerlines or underground cables that have been put in some time ago, you are saying people do not know they are there any more or where they go. What do you propose would be the best way to approach finding out where they are?

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — You get an electronic thing.

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — A detector.

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — You can trace them from the source of power and follow them in the ground.

The CHAIR — So that is possible to do?

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — Yes.

Mrs CLUTTERBUCK — Yes, you can get those; they are detectors.

Mr CLUTTERBUCK — The whole trouble is that farmers are always in a big hurry to do something. You go down to do a job and they all panic; they have something else to do and they put you off your guard in a lot of cases. That is what I find with a lot of them, but not everybody.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time and providing us with this idea. It is great. You will get a copy of the transcript and you will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.