CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Melbourne – 20 January 2004

Members

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Witnesses

Dr M. Barlass, Acting Executive Director, Primary Industries Research Victoria (affirmed);
Mr M. Coster, Project Leader, Future Family Farms (sworn); and
Mr R. Impey, Occupational Health and Safety Compliance and Operations Manager (sworn),
Department of Primary Industries.
The CHAIR — Welcome. The staff of the committee have just informed me that Kevin Breen is present. He has come from Florida to talk to us tomorrow about the ATV issues and other engineering things, so a special welcome to you and thank you for taking our inquiry so seriously and giving us your time, Kevin.

Under the powers conferred on it by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act the committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise everybody present that all evidence taken by this committee at this hearing, 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 them outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. The committee is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence today on its inquiry into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms. Could each witness provide us with their full name and address and say whether they are appearing in a private capacity or representing an organisation? Could you also outline your position in that organisation?

Dr BARLASS — Martin Barlass, I am the acting executive director for Primary Industries Research Victoria, which is a division of the Department of Primary Industries. The address is 475 Mickleham Road, Atwood. I am representing DPI.

Mr COSTER — Max Coster, I am the project leader for a program called Future Family Farms. I am also the department’s representative on the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance. I am based at the Epsom office at Bendigo.

Mr IMPEY — Bob Impey, 40 Ballarto Road, Frankston North. I am representing the Department of Primary Industries. I am the occupational health and safety compliance and operations manager.

The CHAIR — The evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. If you now make a statement or some preliminary comments for about 10 minutes the committee members will then ask some questions of you.

Dr BARLASS — I would like to make a short opening statement to emphasise the main points we have detailed in our submission, and also to provide you with some additional papers which have now been circulated. We would like to table those papers to assist you in your discussions and deliberations.

DPI is a large government department with a broad range of activities and programs, with responsibilities in the food and agriculture, fisheries and minerals and petroleum sectors. Within government DPI does not have direct responsibility for occupational health and safety, or specifically farm safety. However, we support the activities of the Farmsafe Alliance and are more directly involved in this area in two major ways. Firstly, we operate a number of research farms ourselves and have rigorously developed and enforced OHS policies and procedures to protect staff, operating across the whole workplace including offices and laboratories as well as farms. Secondly, as we have detailed in the submission, we have a wide range of programs, many of which deal directly with farmers and which include OHS as an important component. A good example of this is in the safe and correct use of agricultural chemicals. However, we usually deliver these in the context of other programs and outcomes except where we may be providers of training along with other organisations — for example, the farm chemical users course.

Alongside me are my colleagues Bob Impey and Max Coster. Between us we cover a range of responsibilities, not necessarily all those covered in our submission, but we will attempt to cover any questions and further inquiries the committee may have.

Mr WALSH — How does the chemicals in agriculture program differ from the Chemcert chemical users course people do?

Mr COSTER — In deciding who should have access to the level 7 chemicals the department actually has to draw some sort of level, and it has been decided that with the permit system in place, to achieve a permit to purchase those chemicals people must have completed that farm chemicals users course. That is the format. The department actually has two members sitting on that committee. That is the way in which we work.

Mr WALSH — Is the chemicals in agriculture program a learning program or training program? In your submission you talk about the chemical and agriculture program, Chemcert, which is the users certificate, and you also talk about the ACUP licence. What is the first program? What is the chemicals in agriculture program you have in your submission?
Dr BARLASS — The chemicals in agriculture program is the AQA program which covers a whole raft of activities looking at risk analysis, audits and some of the legislative requirements for agricultural chemicals in particular. A range of programs run off that, like the farm produce survey which has been running since 1987, and more specific audits of potential high-risk areas.

Mr WALSH — It is a within department program more than an extension program?

Dr BARLASS — Yes, correct. Many of our agricultural chemical programs are delivered that way as part of the responsibilities we have, rather than extension programs per se.

Mr WALSH — What useful purpose does the ACUP licence serve?

Mr COSTER — It provides a measure of some basis for which people are able to purchase the more toxic chemicals. Some sort of measure had to be in place to actually determine who should have access to those chemicals or not, so the completion of the course is the level of training and then the permit is the intent to use. It is basically a standard that was established to determine who should have access to the chemicals.

Mr WALSH — What is the standard? Everyone who does a chemical user certificate has that. My understanding is all you do is send a cheque for $38 to get an ACUP licence; there is no further test or accreditation that you need. It is just a $38 cheque and you get a piece of paper in the mail to go and buy the chemicals.

Mr COSTER — More people do the training than get the permit — a lot of TAFE students and people who are employees who do not have access to the permit.

Mr WALSH — What useful purpose does the permit have?

Dr BARLASS — If we cannot answer that we can seek further information on it. I am certainly not familiar with it.

Mr WALSH — It is a pet hate of mine. It is just a money raiser.

Dr NAPTHINE — In relation to DPI’s own properties, I note in your submission that tragically there has been an fatality on a DPI-operated farm. This might be very sensitive, but was that an accident or were there other issues there?

Dr BARLASS — The circumstances surrounding it are not clear. The person involved had suffered a heart attack and it is not clear from the inquiry that followed whether that was as a result of driving into the dam or the driving into the dam came after that. Certainly Workcover did a review of that and decided not to proceed any further. As a follow-up to that we tightened up all the regulations around how dams are marked et cetera.

Dr NAPTHINE — Can you provide the committee with details over the last say five years of Workcover claims and accident incident reports on DPI-operated farms? I ask for that information because one of the issues is trying to get an assessment of what is a reasonable level of accident injury. If the committee suggests we invest significantly in reducing levels of accident injury on farms across Victoria, is there an achievable target? I would perhaps be so bold as to suggest that DPI-operated farms should be at the forefront in terms of low accident and injury rates. I am interested in what those rates are.

Mr IMPEY — You are correct, we can provide the information. I do not know if it will assist greatly because, as you rightly say, we are at the forefront. We are extremely strict on health and safety and it may distort what you are trying to get at.

Dr NAPTHINE — I would say that would be a base level, a benchmark, so that if you are on a certain accident injury rate at DPI farms and you are at the forefront, then we cannot really expect the general farm to be achieving higher levels than that.

Mr IMPEY — I agree. We can supply that information.

The CHAIR — Do families live on DPI farms?

Mr IMPEY — It is getting less, but there are some.
Mr CRUTCHFIELD — To follow on from Denis’s point in terms of the inspection and audit regime on DPI farms, what is your opinion on the ability to extend that to private properties? What is your belief in terms of extending that best practice? I know there are myriad issues.

Mr IMPEY — I do not envy the task of this committee. You have to change attitudes on private farms. That same attitude does not exist on DPI farms. We have education and training and compulsion. We can compel our staff to do whatever we require in terms of OHS.

Mr WALSH — You also do not have to make a profit, though.

Mr IMPEY — Exactly. I do not know that that would exist on private farms. Having previously worked with the state regulator, Worksafe, and investigated fatalities on farms, I know there is a hard attitude on private farms as to not wanting to be directed to do something to make it safe. It is the view, ‘What would you know, you are not a farmer?’ That is a very difficult concept to try to get around and to change.

Dr BARLASS — There would be very significant differences obviously between small farms, single owner-operator, family-type farms and what they can and cannot do and who does what. None of our people are allowed to drive ATVs unless they have done courses, got certificates et cetera, so there would be some significant differences.

The CHAIR — A witness today talked about model farms, model machinery sheds and that sort of thing, and the fact that really those things do not exist any more at Dookie and Longerong, that they are doing more of that work on real farms. Are DPI farms available for that kind of training, or could they be made available for that kind of training?

Dr BARLASS — The sole reason for the farms is for research purposes. Some other things happen on them and we certainly do courses from time to time that are related, but the core responsibility that we have is to use those farms for research purposes. I am not sure what would be involved in what you are suggesting, but there may well be significant costs in setting up, but it is not necessarily our core business to do that.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Other than that, what is to stop it occurring? Other than suggesting it is not core business, if Worksafe said it could see a benefit, or one of the training providers said there was a policy change, if it could happen and you had the budget to apply it, are there any benefits from your point of view?

Dr BARLASS — From our perspective I am not sure there are any benefits. However, that does not necessarily mean it cannot happen. I would have to inquire into the insurance questions and a range of other things, but we do training on our properties in some laboratories so there could well be very few barriers to that happening. Certainly there would be a number of things to look into to be clear about that.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you have lists of farm machinery and equipment which is available in the market but which you have instructed your farms that they cannot buy for health and safety reasons?

Mr IMPEY — Not directly. We would ask that all purchases be reviewed using risk assessment hazard identification in relation to health and safety, but there would not be any specific direction such as, ‘No, you cannot buy a piece of X equipment’. We would, however, request that a hazard ID risk assessment be done on it. That may mean that the manufacturer or supplier may have to make some modifications to suit our workplace.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you have a list, for example, of motorbikes and ATVs and that you only purchase specific sizes or capabilities?

Mr IMPEY — Not that I am aware of.

Dr NAPTHINE — On what basis did you make it compulsory for people to wear helmets when riding ATVs on your properties?

Mr IMPEY — It was a Worksafe directive. It produced a document, which is available on its web site, which says people should wear helmets.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Should, or are they compulsory?
Mr IMPEY — I think it actually said ‘should’, but we took it one step further and said it was compulsory. We had been doing it in an ad hoc fashion for many years. Some establishments had been doing it and some had not. Now we say across the board that everyone wears a helmet.

Dr NAPTHINE — Is it compulsory to wear helmets on two-wheeled motorbikes?

Mr IMPEY — Yes, it is.

Dr NAPTHINE — What about taking dogs on ATVs and motorbikes?

Mr IMPEY — It is prohibited.

Dr NAPTHINE — I better not tell you about what I have seen then.

Mr IMPEY — I would be glad to hear about that because if it is occurring I would like to know about it.

The CHAIR — With regard to grain handling storage workshops, do you conduct those on farm? How are those workshops being taken up by the public? Have they been used by farmers and appreciated by farmers?

Dr BARLASS — I made some inquiries about that very point about an hour ago so I have some fresh information on that. About 900 farmers have done those particular courses. They have not been evaluated per se because the point of them was more to do with the correct and effective use of phosphine as the fumigant rather than necessarily the safe aspects of that. Clearly that was part of it, but the main driver for it was more about its effective use so that it can be used in such a way that it is actually having an effect. Although there has not been a formal evaluation of that, I believe it has led to the DPI and industry getting together to develop a strategy for the use of that particular chemical. Max, have you anything up to date on that?

Mr COSTER — The only other information I could add to that is there have been workshops conducted by farmer groups at which we have provided a speaker on grain storage — Peter Botta is the one that comes to mind — and where we have had someone working with that group. The Wallup Top Crop group is one I am aware of where we have a facilitator working with the group. We have an involvement there. Farm safety was an issue that farmers wanted to raise so Peter Botta was brought in to give one of the sessions. But they also got in people from Vicroads to talk about machinery on roads, so it was just one of a number of activities. Our primary role for running the Top Crop groups is more effective grain production.

The CHAIR — I have taken part in a beef check course just out of interest to see what DPI does. I noted that a lot of the focus is on farm profitability and farm management, but in the end it is about getting the most value out of your land. Has DPI done any work on the relationship of farm safety and profitability so that farmers can see, despite economic hardship right now, there are obviously profitable outcomes if you run a safe operation?

Dr BARLASS — Not that I am aware of.

The CHAIR — If there is evidence surely that would be the one thing that will get farmers to actually take on board the safety message more than anything else.

Dr NAPTHINE — Is there a policy within the department to ensure that in all publications, field days, presentations at shows, there is a check to make sure occupational health and safety issues are covered — for example, you do not have publications with photographs of people riding motorbikes without helmets; that you do not have publications that inadvertently send the wrong message? Do you have a vetting process?

Mr IMPEY — There have been some publications put out in local areas. I can talk about Gippsland where a local publication is put out and there is always a section about safety on farms, what is occurring on DPI farms and how that can relate to private farms, but nothing more than that that I am aware of.

Dr BARLASS — I can certainly answer that from the chemical side and Bob may have other information. Any reference to chemicals in any publication of ours is referred to the chemical standards branch to check exactly that, to make sure the reference to chemicals is correct, appropriate, safe, effective and meets legislative guidelines. That is for chemicals.

Mr IMPEY — I am not aware of any policy which dictates that. If it was in existence, the documents would come via me and I do not see them.
Dr BARLASS — Having said that, all documents are vetted by a quality control system and commonsense would suggest that inappropriate photos would not appear.

Dr NAPTHINE — If there is a photograph of somebody using a chainsaw, making sure they are appropriately kitted up et cetera?

Mr COSTER — I think the culture within the organisation is such that internally they are so OHS focused that it may slip through, but it would be rare, I think.

Mr IMPEY — Very rare.

Mr WALSH — With the farm safety programs you are doing through your extension work and as part of your extension program is there any liaison, cooperation or partnerships with the Workcover inspectors as to the quality of that and how it can be improved in the future?

Mr COSTER — As I understand it the organisations work very closely together. Workcover and the health department and DPI work very closely, as they do with the Victorian Farmers Federation. There is a very good working relationship at the field level with chemicals, so there is no Lone Ranger type of activities.

Mr WALSH — Is there any formalised structure that does that?

Mr COSTER — There is no formalised structure. I have been on the Farmsafe Alliance committee now for nine months and I would have to say that it has not really delivered a great deal in that nine months as a formal organisation. Where the work tends to happen is on an officer-to-officer basis in the departments, and that relationship is very good.

Mr WALSH — Has any thought been given to how that may be formalised to actually improve? If you have a captive audience in a program — for example, a Target 10 workshop — has any thought been given to how, by cooperating with the Workcover authority, that could be improved to get the right message across about OHS issues as well?

Mr COSTER — If it was a Target 10 program and they were talking about effluent ponds, yes, safety would be a key issue and Workcover would be brought in, but if they were talking about grass budgeting, no, there would not be any consideration at that sort of level even though they may be dealing with electric fences. In areas where it is considered that safety is an issue, then certainly other departments are involved.

Dr BARLASS — The information that would be used in those would be drawn down from standards and guidelines produced by those sorts of authorities.

Mr WALSH — One of the constant things that has been raised in a lot of submissions is the issue of cultural change and how you get cultural change is something we all seek the magic answer to. It is probably something about this constant reinforcement, in a simple and user-friendly way.

Dr BARLASS — It has been referred to here as well. We have the ability to make this mandatory and that reinforces a culture of safety. We also have the extensive use of training to reinforce that, so it is constant reinforcement, as you say.

Mr WALSH — Constant training for your people is vastly different from how you impact on farmers with your extension programs?

Dr BARLASS — Correct, yes.

Mr COSTER — The difficulty is how you project from a public organisation to a private investment-operated organisation.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your submission and for taking the time to give us your evidence today. 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. Thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.