RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Horsham – 11 March 2004

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Witness

Mr K. Grosser, Director, Irwin Motors Farm Machinery.
The CHAIR — Thank you. Can you give us your full name and address and then you can speak to us for a few minutes.

Mr GROSSER — My name is Kym Grosser. I am a director of Irwin Motors Farm Machinery, 125 Stawell Road, Horsham. I only heard about this hearing last night, so I have just a couple of quick points on what I have heard so far. I may have missed other things that have gone on.

I want to speak on Worksafe and my experience of what I have seen in the farm machinery game. Just to give you a bit more of my history and background, I was 20 years in the air force, and I have come back into farm machinery in only the last couple of years. Worksafe and OHS and all that are obviously big things. From what I have seen with us selling machinery with guards, and this is ATVs — we sell Honda ATVs — as well as augers, big harvesters, tractors and whatever. From what I have seen in the last couple or three years, there is a trend among farmers starting to change their practices — guards and that are an issue that they are looking at.

To give you an idea, we sell two different brands of augers. One we actually have to put the guards on ourselves. They come into the country from Canada or wherever. There is another Canadian brand that comes with guards on. The guards we have to put on ourselves cover the pulleys and belts and things like that, but they are hard to get back into the belts. To give you an idea, some of those machines have gone out, the guards have come off because they cannot get to the pulleys, and they stay off. We have another brand which is a very easy set-up — one clip, and you can get into those pulleys to adjust it. They stay on. That is actually a selling point now. We sell probably 20 of those augers to one of the others, just because they are easy to get to.

We also get that on big harvesters — the same things on guards. We trade in machines two to three years old and 9 times out of 10 a machine will come in and I have to send the guys out to get the guards which are in the shed, on which the lady made the comment before. That is because they make it hard to get to the belts. When they are operating, the belts break, they want to get to them quickly, they will do it quickly, the guards come off and they do not go back on. When machinery manufacturers are making guards they need to make them so that there is easy access to get to whatever they have to get to as well, because if it is hard it is just a common human experience to get rid of it and get back into it.

On ATVs, there is a trend that we are starting to see more and more helmets, I have noticed just in the last probably 12 months. Because there is an awareness of Workcover or whatever — I mean on-farm inspections or something — that they are worried about. Especially if they have workers working for them they will supply helmets. If they do not have workers, they are not worried about themselves, and they will not do it. But they think, ‘I’ve got someone riding this thing; I’ve got to supply that helmet in case he falls off and I’ve got the helmet there’. The other one is that if they perceive that they have to go onto the road to go down to another farm 10 or 20 kilometres down the road, they think, ‘We better have a helmet in case we get caught’, sort of thing. Whereas if it is around the paddocks and that, the helmet is going to stay in the shed.

Honda actually supply videos and booklets on safety. We actually stress that these guys have got to look at, but we all know that 9 times out of 10 that will stay with the manual. Some people will look at them. I suppose ATVs are like any piece of farm equipment. They are another tool, and if you use them with commonsense they are not going to hurt you, but if you do not use commonsense, like using a tractor, any other farm machinery or a car or whatever, you can hurt yourself.

I notice that there is more and more media on ATVs and on-farm accidents just of late. My perception of why we are hearing more and more of that on four-wheelers is — to give you an idea — that we probably sell 20 ATVs to one two-wheel motorbike, whereas going back 10 years ago that would have been around the other way. I know it is a lot easier to fall off a two-wheel motorbike. I grew up on a farm myself, chasing cattle and things like that. If you hit a stump, you are over the bars straightaway. If you hit one on a four-wheeler, you will not even notice it because they have balloon tyres. These are just personal experiences, but that is a trend I have come across.

Mr Ingram mentioned something about a book or something. I do not know the background on that. They might be Farmsafe books going out to farmers.

Mr INGRAM — It is actually the report we are writing — that is what I meant.
Mr GROSSER — Sorry. I got that totally wrong. I have seen Farmsafe booklets and all that, and they are good if someone sits down and reads them, but for most farmers — not just farmers — they will go on the shelf. It all comes down to commonsense, and they perceive themselves as having commonsense and do not see them.

To give you an idea, we run a workshop in town here. Apparently just recently Workcover did a couple of inspections. That went through the town like wildfire. Not only ourselves, but other people said, ‘Get out there and get our guards back on; check all the guards on our grinders and welders and all that sort of stuff’. I do not know if there are on-farm inspections — farmers probably would not like me mentioning that they are going to be inspected. I believe that inspections do not have to be penalty inspections. They can be initial inspections to say, ‘We’re going to come around to the farms and look at them and say, “This is what you need to fix up”’. I reckon that would go a long way, more than anything else probably, just to getting a message across, to say, ‘Right, we’re coming out to your farm. That machine hasn’t got a guard on it; that could kill someone. You could get fined’.

There is a lot of media at the moment about workplaces and what happens if someone dies. You have seen that if people die on building sites it comes back to the director, who is going to be hammered. It is the same on the farm. If they know they are going to be covered — there is a possibility that they could be hammered — that sinks in a long way, sort of thing. I see the building practices and automotive workshops, and it is probably the same on farms. I do not know how much of that goes on, because I have not looked into it that much on that side of things.

There is one other point. I have noticed over the last few years the old ROPS program on tractors. I do not know what the full program is, but I know that it got around to farmers a lot. It is very rare that I will go onto a farm now to do a quote or whatever where I will see a tractor without a ROPS frame. Whatever that program was and how it was perceived — it was a bit before my time — it obviously worked very well. We did sell a lot of ROPS up until a couple of years ago. Now most farm tractors have rollover protection. They are probably all the points I would like to make.

Mr MITCHELL — Do you use the VACC Hazcheck system on second-hand machinery or do you have a system in place if you get a trade-in or something?

Mr GROSSER — Yes. Basically if we get a trade-in. We are a member of the VACC, and I have had a look at their programs or whatever. Before a tractor goes out we make sure that it has a ROPS and that the guards are back on it — the whole lot. Like I said, we trade in second-hand machines and we have got to send guys out to get those guards back 9 times out of 10 and get them on the machinery, so that when we sell something those guards are on it. Even on new machines there is an area where we sign and the farmer signs that this machine is fitted with guards, rollover protection and whatever. We say that we are fully aware of it and that they are there for a reason. What happens after that is up to them.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that. It was good.

Committee adjourned.