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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Mr B. N. Ray, Lecturer, Animal Production, Longerenong College, University of Melbourne (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome, Barry. For the purpose of receiving a transcript for corrections later on, could you please give us your full name, address and whether you are representing an organisation and, if so, what the name of the organisation is and your position within it?

Mr RAY — I am Barry Noel Ray and my postal address is PO Box 832, Horsham. I am here representing the Longerenong College of the University of Melbourne in Horsham, and I have detailed my role within that organisation in my submission.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Barry. Obviously this evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Could you make a statement for 5-or-so minutes, then we will have time afterwards to ask you some questions after that.

Mr RAY — Thank you. I welcome the committee to Horsham. Firstly, I would like to apologise for John Goldsmith. He was also on the bill to support me in my submission today; he unfortunately has teaching commitments and cannot be here today.

I guess what you will hear from me today is probably duplication of previous speakers and people in other venues. You will hear a little bit of ideology, I suppose, about where I would like to see farm safety go. Whether it is achievable or not, I suppose that is in your hands rather than mine to some extent.

I have had a lot of broad experience in a large number of primary industries: extensive grazing, horticulture for several years, and more recently pig production in the intensive industries. I also believe I have quite a deal of experience in regard to occupational health and safety; moreover because I have done and continue to undertake risky work practices in my workplace at home. I am quite open and up front in saying that because I think that is the root of the problem that we are here talking about today. I am not an OHS researcher as such, so I have not been in a position to collect information and data — pre-empting a question that will no doubt come from the committee. I currently teach occupational health and safety, farm water supplies, sheep and cattle production, pig production and animal reproduction. Our organisation out at Longerenong also undertakes training in all areas of agriculture at skills level, including forklift training, which may be an issue for comment further on.

As well as instructing in occupational health and safety in the farming industries, the University of Melbourne is also undertaking a program called Safetymap as its own organisation as an employer. This is a huge commitment from the university and it is an example of one way that employers may go in developing programs to make workplaces safer. It is a huge investment on their part. One example was to put the power supply at Longerenong College underground, which was deemed as a risk and was acted on immediately. The level of acceptance is seen as an absolute necessity for this program, but again the word ‘priority’ comes up and it tends to be down the list even for ourselves. It has been a time-consuming program. We are in about the end of the third year of this program and really it is only now starting to come to some level of completion with our internal program. The aim of Safetymap is more or less to try to create some standard operating procedures for all levels of safety, production and quality assurance. So it is an integrated program based on the hazard analysis and critical control point (HACCP) principle of critical control points at all levels of activity to cover the risks involved in all those areas.

In terms of OHS delivery within the university, and more specifically at Longerenong, we comply with a set of nationally accredited OHS standards. My understanding is that the committee has a copy of those, that I forwarded earlier. Those standards that we respond to increase in complexity, I suppose, as you go up the levels to certificates 2, 3 and 4. The wording of those documents simply respond to that level of complexity. Following OHS regulations is the first level; implementing and monitoring; and then establishing and maintaining — so it is a staged progression. Our delivery, though, is based on the general theory of OHS being hazard identification, risk assessment, risk management and some level of induction programs and other documentation at the higher levels. I have to say that delivering OHS programs academically and formally, as is required by our charter, is very difficult to achieve. More recently I have had to deal with 16-year-old kids from the VET in Schools program, which I hope you are familiar with. It is a tough gig to try and communicate with these kids.

In terms of results of that level of training, my understanding is that the students are, if not before certainly afterwards, very aware of the principles of OHS. I do not have a problem with their level of awareness. They are deemed to be competent, which is our form of assessment, at the time of delivery. Part of the formal delivery of OHS training is completion of a first-aid certificate, which is embedded in the standards.
Students, and farmers in general I think, are again well aware of the principles, but tend to suffer from two things. I have termed those two things the invincibility of youth and the complacency of experience. I use an acronym, IWHTM, with my students and the quick ones pick it up to mean ‘it won’t happen to me’. I think that is an underlying problem that we have a lot of trouble dealing with at all levels. The example that I use, especially with my 16-year-old VET kids is, ‘Do you ride a motorbike?’ I will not ask the committee the same question. I ask, ‘Have you ridden a motorbike in the past or ride a motorbike?’ I get every hand in the room up. I then ask them, ‘Do you always wear a helmet?’ There are not too many hands left in the air because they do not think it is going to happen to them. I ask them, ‘Why?’ Simply, ‘It’s too hot’, ‘It doesn’t look good’, ‘I’m only going a short distance on the motorbike’, ‘I’m only travelling slow’, or ‘I can’t be bothered’. They are the sorts of genuine reasons that young people come up with, knowing full well that danger but still not prepared to wear the protective equipment. I have termed this process acceptable risk. They have an ability to say that is an acceptable risk to them. Acceptable risk is influenced by things like age, experience, state of mind, fatigue, alcohol and peer pressure — all of those things come into our judgment of acceptable risk. Eventually we change — as we age, I think, more than anything else — because of family influences, near misses or a relationship to a victim that jogs us into some sense that it is not an acceptable risk any more.

There are some levels of harm minimisation, as I have termed it, both in general life and on farms. With seatbelts in cars, we have all come to respect that as a harm minimisation process. There has certainly been a reduction in fatalities and serious injury as a result of people wearing seatbelts. I would question though whether we see a reduction in risky driving behaviour.

There has been quite a bit said about rollover protection systems in past meetings of this committee. Again there has been a reduction in tractor rollover fatalities where ROPS have been fitted. The question I would ask is: have we seen a reduction in risky tractor driving operation? There are also other systems in the pipeline: tractor seatbelts, tractor mounting hand holds, and platforms to get on and off tractors. I think that is a move in the right direction.

Our solution? Again awareness is not the problem. I see that the development of materials should have the influence of psychologists rather than marketers. There is a stack of stuff out there. It is basically aimed at marketing, rather than understanding how people think in order to effect some change. Some of the things that restrict people’s ability to change their behaviour are difficult to overcome: peer pressure, resistance generally, and just this simple one of what I will call fashion. Helmets on horses is a topic that is reasonably hot at the moment. Kids say, ‘I would rather wear an Akubra because a helmet does not look good’. It does not matter if they fall off and injure themselves. In terms of where we should end up, I believe that information at all levels — be it formal training or informal men’s health nights — should be uniform and relatively standardised. We need to have information that is aimed at effecting sustained behavioural change of people, and it is not a short-term process. I liken the change of behaviour of farmers, and moreover people in workplaces everywhere, as a generational change similar to that involved with — —

I have mentioned seatbelts, reducing the road toll and even smoking. That is the level of change we have to look at on the broad scale — that is, uniform and standardised. Some level of saturation, like the hard-hitting Workcover ads we have seen on television, are good, but we need to continue with saturation exposure to the theory of workplace safety in order to get some form of change.

It has to be made social. Again I am referring to Wendy’s address and men’s health nights and incorporating the theory of farm safety into social events to make it more attractive. That more than anything else needs to be implemented. It needs to be subversive to some extent so that people do not know they are being got at, so to speak. It is a brainwashing exercise we have to go through. It has to be simple. That goes without saying. What about schools? Again there is repetition there, but you always start with the kids. They are the ones who are going to influence the older generations and then become farmers themselves. It is also important to link farm safety with productivity and profitability on farms, because that is one way that people sit up and listen.

I have been involved with delivering workshops in the pig industry for 10 or 12 years. I have regular attendances of high numbers at workshops that deal directly with production issues. As soon as I mention occupational health and safety, quality insurance or environmental management, people recognise their value, but they do not put it on their priority list. It is as simple as that.
Some form of regulation needs to be included in this idealistic plan, I guess. We have some at the moment at various levels. We provide explosive courses at Longerenong, and they are highly regulated and registered, as you would expect. We can go right down to formalised induction training for various pieces of equipment, like angle grinders and ATVs, because they are becoming the new tractors in terms of farm safety problems. That is about all I have to say at this moment. If you have any questions, please ask them.

Mr INGRAM — We had a bit of evidence, and it is fairly obvious in most of the presentations, that one of our major challenges is that most farmers operate alone in one operator-type environments, usually fairly remote from their family and other groups. It is very easy to dismiss the near misses — and you mentioned the near misses. How do we get around that so that those near misses are recognised and farmers see the risks involved? It seems that some farmers will accept a number of near misses without taking any change of behaviour?

Mr RAY — It is an individual choice for every person to make. You have mentioned that they might accept one or more near misses. As we get a bit older we realise that we are not immortal, unlike we were when we were a bit younger. How you convince people to change their mindsets in that regard I am really struggling to come to terms with. I have seen and heard of so many of these near misses, and it is really up to every individual to think, ‘Maybe next time it will not be a near miss’, until they change their behaviour. I am sorry if I cannot answer your question, but that is as far as I can go with it.

Mr INGRAM — Do you see that as the crux of our problem — that is, trying to get people to recognise that?

Mr RAY — I think it is. I look at myself and my own actions. I fell off my pushbike last year and dislocated my shoulder. After that time I now wear a helmet whereas I did not before. Why did I not wear a helmet before? I cannot even answer that for myself. It is not helping you, but that is the level of complexity of the problem, I guess.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You heard my question to the previous speaker about the VFF and municipalities. What is your view on the coordination of programs in respect to farm safety and groups that may not already participate but may add worth to a holistic approach?

Mr RAY — My comment about standardisation and uniformity goes to that theme. Wendy Altmann referred to ad hoc delivery in some regard to some of this information. There has to be some level of coordination so that we get the best materials and the best of everybody’s experiences in terms of delivery and conversion of information into behavioural change. Whether that is done on a municipality basis, a state basis or even a national basis is the question we have to deal with. I come — and I refer back to my pig industry experience — from an industry that is very small and by necessity has to have a national approach, which it does, to training at all levels. So it becomes coordinated and standardised and people are registered to deliver in each state and that sort of theory applies. As to whether we can take the same model and use it in this context, I think we can, and that is where we need to go. The amount of information out there is enormous in terms of pamphlets and CD-ROM packages and interactive information for this topic, but it needs to be brought together somehow to give it some continuity.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about Worksafe itself as an organisation? Do you think the perception of it is purely in its inspectorial role, or is it seen as an educative part of work in more recent times? What do you think the view of an average farmer would be of Worksafe?

Mr RAY — Its role has changed, therefore the view of the farming community has changed of it. It used to be more regulatory — and that alone — but it tends to have softened its line to some extent in that it is more visible and more current on farms, I suppose, and not quite so heavy handed. It gives people the ability to make their own choices and change and fix things to avoid hazards.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is that better? Does that work?

Mr RAY — I think it is because it gives them some more respect. There is no point in a policeman—shall I call Worksafe that? — being stopped at the gate and not even getting onto the farm when hazards are there. Let us at least get them in and get the communication happening. It is all about this cultural rejection of the policeman that we have on farms. We get a bit protective of our patch and do not like people interfering, even if we know we are doing the wrong thing. It is a bit like Wendy was quoting, saying that dad had just put the lock on the
chemical shed. I think we have all been through those experiences. But Worksafe is a good body to oversee and take on that role in the first instance.

Mr McQUILLEN — What about the theory of older farmers and older people — like you and me — who are a bit slow to change and pick up new ideas? What about the problems of litigation and issues of insurance and the fear farmers have that if they do not fix things up they could end up in court or in real trouble in the future? Is that possibly one problem? It is a bit like the fear of being caught out or having a bad accident which they then cannot explain — for example, why they took the guards off and all their insurance becoming void as a result of that?

Mr RAY — That will come. It has certainly been an issue for us in the university, and that is why we have gone done down this process. It has really stirred us into action in that regard, and it has effected a lot of changes in our operation. As far as older farmers go, I think they are aware of it and aware of the notion that we live in a world of increased litigation everywhere. They are well aware of that. I think that that will generate a greater percentage who will actually try and do the right thing. There will be a group that dig their heels in and say, ‘It’s all another subversive plot to get us to change’ — and it will make them more rigid in their opposition perhaps. We are talking about shifting the mind-set of a large group of diverse people, and any little thing that will chip away will be a positive thing.

Mr INGRAM — What are your views overall of the quality of your OHS training, and can we improve it? The previous presenter mentioned that one of the programs was a two-day program and said it was obvious that farmers just would not take that up because that is two days off the farm. While I understand that yours is a more comprehensive program, how do we deliver the OHS training out to the farmers, and are the current models good enough?

Mr RAY — I totally agree with Wendy in regard to taking people off farm, because I have had to deal with it for a number of years in other industries. It is a difficult issue to drag people out of a production system for a period of time, given that they do not see it as earning them some money, even though by default it is. On the overall quality — I cannot speak for others, of course — again I deal with younger people, so it is a general awareness thing. They are not interested in it, so it is all about having a product that can get them interested and trying to see that it is followed up and implemented. I come back to my statement on achieving behavioural change — and that is a long-term process.

Mr INGRAM — So basically you are trying to deliver yours to the next generation. What about the current generation, the ones who are out there? Is the current OHS training good enough? What sorts of models do we need to do it? How do we deliver the programs to the current farmers?

Mr RAY — I think that under a coordinated approach of all sorts of delivery we need to see how they are prepared to accept the information. I have found that it is no good going to them with a package and force-feeding them. If they do not want it, they will not attend. We had to find out what they are prepared to achieve, be it a 2-hour block one night a week for four weeks, so that it does give them the opportunity to come off farm or make it a social event, so that they get there. That is the first thing — get them in the door. I think the information can be developed in a fashion that they accept the change, but getting them in the door is the tough ask. So I suppose it is changing the format. What that combination is — it could be anything.

Mr MITCHELL — A few submissions we have received have talked about discounting of insurance and so on for those who are willing to accept the change and then comply. What is your view on that, as compared to perhaps having those who already comply and can prove they comply and are proactive in occupational health and safety et cetera then given maybe some form of discount on insurance or their Workcover premiums or something? Do you think that sort of approach would help?

Mr RAY — I am pretty sure that it will, because the cost of insurance has increased so much anyway that people are really smarting from that impost on their production system. My understanding is that that is why we have gone to the Safetymap process. We have become not quite a self-insurer but certainly a self-auditor, and we do achieve premium discounts for that. If you think of Melbourne University as a massive organisation, we have a huge cost there. We have seen that as being the best way to trade off. I think that farmers will recognise that, if that is a possibility. If they are doing the right thing and are seen to be able to undergo an audit process to prove that
they are doing the right thing, by all means. I think that their claims on Workcover are going to be less, and therefore they should be given the benefit of the diligence and hard work in that respect, for sure.

Mr Ingram — That really only gets it to the farmers who are paying wages. Most farmers are self-employed. Workcover does not really get to the farmers unless they are paying wages, does it?

Mr Ray — They still have to be insured. They will be insuring themselves, to some extent. They are family businesses. We have heard the examples of the husband being permanently incapacitated or dying and the wife being lumbered with the problems thereafter, in terms of litigation. So there is still some application for the owner-operator as such.

The Chair — Barry, thank you very much. You have obviously put a lot of time into trying to help us with recommendations. You have put a lot of thought into that, and we appreciate it greatly. Thank you very much for giving us your time today. You will get a copy of the transcript. Any obvious errors of fact or grammar can be corrected, but not matters of substance.

Mr Ray — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.