RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Canberra – 22 January 2004

Members

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Ms D. Harris, Policy Manager, Employment, and Industrial Relations Advocate (sworn); and
Mr P. Arkle, Policy Manager, Rural Affairs (sworn), National Farmers Federation.
Welcome, Peter and Denita. It is very good of you to give us your time here today. If I could ask for your full name and address, plus whether you are representing an organisation or yourself individually, and, if you represent an organisation, in what capacity.

Mr ARKLE — My name is Peter James Arkle, 14 Brisbane Avenue, Barton, ACT. I represent the National Farmers Federation in the capacity of policy manager for rural affairs.

Ms HARRIS — Denita Harris, 14 Brisbane Avenue, Barton, ACT. I am the policy manager for employment and the industrial relations advocate for the National Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR — You are representing that organisation today?

Ms HARRIS — That is correct, yes.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and it will become public evidence in due course. If you could please make your presentation now, and if we have any time after we will ask questions on that.

Ms HARRIS — Thank you. We have just a brief statement to make today. We are conscious that there are probably a lot of questions the committee may seek to ask us.

The National Farmers Federation is the peak farming body representing farming organisations throughout Australia, including state farming organisations and our agriculture commodity councils. The Victorian Farmers Federation is a member of NFF.

The NFF vision is to ensure that farmers operate profitable and sustainable farming businesses. Productivity improvement cannot be achieved unless there is an investment in resources, and this is both in human resources and equipment. Health and safety best practice is a component of that investment. Farms, however, cannot be treated as an ordinary work site. This relates to the broad nature of the work, the geographic location of farms and the focus of farms as family businesses with very few employees in the normal course of events. In fact over 80 per cent of farm injuries and fatalities in Australia are not considered as part of the workers compensation statistics, as they are non-employee-injury-related incidences.

The focus for the NFF is not to provide you with information on the statistics, as I am sure you have been inundated with those in the course of events of this committee. Our focus is ensuring that farmers can work effectively, without unnecessary government regulation, but rather seeking that government provide assistance and direction in such a critical area for Australian farmers.

Solutions at a macro level include state governments working towards the national occupational health and safety strategy of consistent legislation to remove the duplication of work that is required in occupational health and safety. There is a distinct lack of maximisation of government resources in OHS due to inconsistency at a national level. There is insufficent focus on providing incentives for better occupational health and safety practice. A good example in Western Australia is that there is a 15 per cent reduction in workers compensation premiums for farmers if the farmer has undertaken a farm-safety management course and there has been no injury on that farm for 12 months. This would be an initiative we would welcome in all jurisdictions.

There is a plethora of work being undertaken and funded by industry on OHS matters, including the joint venture by agricultural research and development organisations under the auspices of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Many of those studies provide recommendations as to how we can deliver better outcomes of educating farmers in best practice of farm safety. However, these programs could be more assisted by governments to ensure that the lessons we learn from projects are implemented on farms.

Our focus is the importance of communication, education and training and how governments and industry can most effectively use our resources to maximise that outcome, given the access and distance issues farmers have to face.
There are some examples in the packs we have distributed of work that has been undertaken by industries in the area of child safety and farm recruitment practices. The pack also contains a number of NFF submissions relating specifically to workers compensation and its relationship to OHS and rehabilitation issues. We certainly highlight in those documents some solutions as resolving some of those issues.

We believe there has to be a greater coordinating role between governments, equipment suppliers to agriculture and the farming sector to minimise the duplication of work in this area and to maximise the financial and human resources we have available to ensure that farm injury and fatalities are reduced on Australian farms.

That is our introduction, Mr Chair. I am open to questions. But just to let you know, Peter has a specialty in the area of chemical OHS practices, whereas I concentrate on more generic OHS issues on farms. So we will leave it to you.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr McQUILTEN — All-terrain vehicles: have you got thoughts on that?

Ms HARRIS — Interesting. Obviously there are some gentlemen behind me who have some interest in that particular issue. Obviously all-terrain vehicles have been a fantastic piece of equipment for farms. There is no question about that; they have been very, very useful. We are obviously conscious that there have been some issues surrounding deaths and particularly that there is a coronial inquiry in Victoria at present. We are keeping a watching brief on that.

We certainly believe you need to ensure there is a maximisation of training in ATV areas and better utilisation of ATVs. We are part of the Farmsafe Australia research on ATV practices at the moment, so we are keeping very much an open mind in terms of the evidentiary issues coming to us.

Ultimately farmers need to utilise ATVs, but they need to utilise them for what they are made for, they need an understanding of the terrain in which they are utilising them, and they also need to be particularly careful in terms of any additions they add on to ATVs. We have had some discussions with both other members of Farmsafe Australia and also the industry manufacturers of ATVs, and we are actually hoping to coordinate a far greater working relationship with those groups to ensure that we can increase training and introduce more information to farmers on being safe.

As I said before we had Hansard recording this, it does not help when particularly tourism operators are not progressing OHS best practice, and we have seen TV examples where ATV usage in a non-safe manner has been promoted to the general public. So we believe there are a wide variety of opportunities for better communication and training in terms of ATVs.

We do not want to see unnecessary regulation on the utilisation of ATVs that would reduce the capacity of those machines for farm usage, but at the same time we want to ensure that we can maximise safety at all times. So we think there is a constructive way we can go collectively, but obviously we are part of the Farmsafe Australia research, and we are keeping an eye, obviously, on the coronial inquiry.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about helmets?

Ms HARRIS — We think it is important to wear helmets. Obviously there is some frustration among farmers in terms of the practicality of helmets. I know from experience doing some sheep mustering in a motorbike helmet, it was bloody uncomfortable in 35-degree heat. So that is frustrating. We need to look at alternative mechanisms whereby you can have an easy and light helmet that is still going to provide the benefits. New Zealand is looking at options on helmets, and we need to talk to people such as Standards Australia and so forth as to how we could look at some helmets that are practical for usage on farms, because there is a difference between farm usage and road usage in terms of the potential accidents that can occur.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Further to that on the particular subject that John alluded to, it would have been tagged closer than Tony Liberatore by the ATV industry, it popped up everywhere, so my interest in ATVs has certainly been aroused. I note your tie, which is the CFA tie, and if you go back in history, ROPS were only recently put on the back of fire trucks, and there was a lot of discussion about whether there should be engineering solutions for trucks.

Where does the NFF sit in terms of the whole gamut of solutions, if you like, the whole range of solutions? I am not convinced at this stage that ROPS cannot be fitted to an ATV. Where does the NFF sit in terms of the whole
range of solutions, from banning ATVs altogether to an engineering solution such as ROPS or other engineering solutions, to education programs, to mandatory licensing, to age limits, to mandatory helmets, to ‘Let it rip and we just won’t make anything mandatory and we won’t regulate anything’?

Ms HARRIS — In terms of our position on the specific issues you have raised, we think that until such time as we have seen the finalisation of the Farmsafe Australia report it is difficult to take a specific position on issues such as ROPS and so forth. We have not been provided with evidence from the experts in this area to say one way or the other.

However, our position is that we want to maximise the safety of machines, both in terms of training and engineering, on the basis that it also does not necessarily limit the benefits of that machinery, but that has to be balanced up between the benefits of the machinery and the safety of the utilisers of that machinery. But we have yet to see the full evidence, and that is why we are very much a part of the process that is occurring at this stage.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That is all very nice, but it tells me nothing. What is your view on mandatory licensing, on mandatory helmets, on age limits and on horsepower limitations?

Ms HARRIS — Our committee that is responsible for making policy in this area has said it wants to see more evidence before it will make specific recommendations on policy in that area.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you have a personal view?

Ms HARRIS — I am representing the NFF. We have committee meetings throughout the year, and we are waiting until we see the finalisation of these reports until the committee can make any policy recommendations. Nevertheless what has occurred over the last 6 to 12 months has heightened the interest in ATVs, and it is being brought up into a far greater priority area than it had previously, and as a consequence it is on the agenda where it has not been previously.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — We had another one killed yesterday, I think, in Victoria. I have not had that confirmed yet. Has the Chair?

The CHAIR — I heard that only second hand too.

Mr INGRAM — You mentioned in the introduction the Western Australian model that gives a reduction in Workcover premiums — have I got that right? — of 15 per cent. Obviously that is a limitation, because as you also indicated in your prelude, most farmers do not pay Workcover for farms because they are self-employed workplaces. Is there any way of trying to provide a like benefit for similar education, because arguably it appears that a lot of the injuries occur to older farmers who are single operators. Can you expand basically on the Western Australia model and also on how we can potentially get to the other farmers who are not paying a premium?

Ms HARRIS — The concept of the workers compensation premiums can easily be extended to personal injury insurance, so we have had some early discussions with insurance companies as to whether or not they would introduce such an incentive. Obviously that is more for private enterprise, where in some jurisdictions workers compensation is government run. But we see the initiative being across the board in all sorts of insurance practices. Insurance companies are either very good at promoting proactive risk-management strategies or they are not, so obviously we can work with the insurance council in ensuring that we can maximise the insurance bodies actually coming on site, looking at the risk-management strategies and ensuring that they can reduce premiums accordingly in terms of the personal injuries insurance. But we are also conscious of the fact that a lot of farmers may not even have personal injury insurance.

So there is the issue of ensuring we can maximise training, but more importantly it is not just training, it is actually implementation on the farm. What we are finding is that many farmers get the training, but they go onto the property and it is not implemented. In some respects it is quite complex in terms of the documentation they are given to implement best practice on the farm, so you have to start from the basics and work through. So there are opportunities to work with the insurance companies on maximising some incentive programs, but that is only a component of what we can introduce as a potential solution in reducing injury.

Mr INGRAM — For that to work it probably needs to be done more at a national than at a state level or at a personal insurance level. Would you agree with that?
Ms HARRIS — Yes. Most of the companies are based nationally. We had some early discussions with one insurer, but that was more of an informal discussion. We would like to initiate more detail in formal negotiations this year because it is very evident that there needs to be a carrot approach in some respects such as incentives, but certainly from my understanding — I have not seen the statistics — the WA model has worked quite well. New South Wales introduced not a similar model but something like that, but it was too restrictive and has caused some angst among the farming community in New South Wales. The West Australian model was simplistic and easy to implement.

Mr ARKLE — Further to Denita’s comments about the uptake of training, we see the Farmbis commonwealth and state programs relating to farm safety issues but farm risks more broadly as absolutely imperative in this area. I guess we are seeing a great uptake in farms over the last five years of subsidies for training of farmers.

Typically the bias as far as the training that has been taken up has been production related, so we would really like to see a shift there to broader risk management issues, and we certainly see farm safety courses as absolutely imperative in that regard. I would press upon the Victorian government the importance of committing to the next phase of the agricultural advance programs, including the Farmbis program, and also of reviewing the criteria of the courses that are accredited under Farmbis.

At the moment it is typically targeted at the level 4 standard against the national quality training framework, and that has represented a disincentive certainly in the area of chemical training. RIRDC Chemcert courses at level 4 relate to enterprise managers as opposed to users so we would like to see a bit more flexibility, even a lowering of the bar, so level 3 training, which is applicators or technical skills, is actually incorporated into Farmbis. That has been a decision of the federal government push for the higher level, but it is certainly looking at things like Chemcerts statistics which have had a huge affect on the number of farms that are accessing training. We want to impress upon the committee the importance of that issue.

The CHAIR — Because of the cost factor?

Mr ARKLE — Cost factor and time factor, and also complexity of training. Obviously it is about continuous improvement. You need to have a reasonable entry level for farmers to access training. We see level 3 as that level and ultimately working towards level 4, but there have been cost impediments with the rural subsidy on the training at the lower level as well as time and complexity factors which are disincentives for farmers to participate, so we see that as important.

Mr WALSH — One of the people giving evidence yesterday in Melbourne said that Victoria is running out of Farmbis money and it was only going to last to the end of June at a reduced spend. We asked whether it is a federal funding issue or a state funding issue. There is money for Farmbis from a federal point of view; and it is just a matter of the state putting the matching dollars up. That is the problem in Victoria.

Mr ARKLE — Yes, I think the arrangement is that the commonwealth and state are tied into three-year funding agreements, obviously ending 30 June this year. In New South Wales the uptake has been so great that the funds have been expended early. What we have seen is states like South Australia and Western Australia and state governments withdrawing funding for Farmbis, so the federal government has said it will take those South Australian and Western Australian funds and if it can have state-matched funds it is willing to put them into Victoria and New South Wales. So that opportunity is there up until 30 June, but we are waiting, I guess, for a commitment from the federal government. I think the expectation from Warren Truss’s point of view is that the states would continue to co-fund Farmbis, and we would see that as a very valuable investment.

Mr WALSH — You talked about cross-border issues and the harmonisation of rules. That has been mentioned quite a few times, but have you some specifics, or can we get them from somewhere?

Ms HARRIS — There are a couple of issues on cross borders. One relates to workers compensation and recognition of one state worker’s compensation in another state — for example, shearing contractors going across borders or properties over two states. But we are focusing more on the need for maximisation of the dollar — for example, Worksafe Victoria put out a fantastic shearing safety booklet — it is a great booklet with good colour pictures, really practical. Our recommendation for other states is that this fantastic Victorian book does not have to be recreated dramatically but the states do have to refer to all the different legislation. As a result of needing to change all the legislation in it, all the other states have now done totally different things. They have spent a huge amount of money, and New South Wales is a particular example. It produced a book three times the size with no
colour pictures, which was not very practical at all. It was all done on the basis that the Victorian one had to be changed to suit the New South Wales legislation, so it was changed totally.

If you had the same legislation you could simply say what Victoria has done, pay the copyright and do a multiple run. New South Wales has introduced quite extensive occupational health and safety regulation which is costing a huge amount of money, but it has not looked at the alternative methods that have been implemented in other states such as Victoria that are less costly but seem to be working quite well.

We think it is critical in OHS, and this came out of the productivity commission inquiry draft report last year, which indicated that there is a critical need for occupational health and safety to be nationalised through the National Occupational Health and Safety Centre strategy so we can then maximise the dollars that the states are spending on training and communication and people going out on to the ground and helping employers. It is critical that the strategy, which all state governments have signed up to, is implemented sooner rather than later because we are seeing a waste of funds.

Mr WALSH — Is it going to be done sooner or later or does it need a push along?

Ms HARRIS — It needs a push along, no question about it, but there has been consistent federal and state government commitment for years that this is going to occur through the NOHSC process, and there has been some evidence but not sufficient evidence that it is going along. There is no question it needs a push, because organisations such as ourselves are trying to focus on OHS, but we cannot implement anything at a practical level because it is up to the state jurisdictions to deal with it. It is hard to get a consistent approach from the industry on OHS when we are dealing with such a difference in state legislation. It is really frustrating as an industry when there are cross-border issues — we have large companies operating in different states that are finding it costly to deal with different jurisdictions — when there is no need for there to be a basis of difference in OHS.

Mr WALSH — Is it an issue to get it on the table for COAG to push it along?

Ms HARRIS — It certainly has been raised in the Workplace Relations Ministerial Council, and certainly we believe if there is not insufficient movement in the next six months it should be pushed up to the COAG level.

The CHAIR — What do you see as the barriers to that?

Ms HARRIS — There is no doubt there is a history of the states having their own jurisdictions and there is a history of development and reasons why states have developed the way they have. Obviously there are people who have been involved in that process for a long time who do not want to let go, so there needs to be a recognition, particularly at a departmental level, that this is critical for businesses to operate effectively, but more importantly that we can then work effectively with the union movement in ensuring we also maximise safety for employees. We are working with the Australian Workers Union on how we can be more proactive at a national level in farm safety for employees, but again it is hampered by the various state jurisdictions. We need people to realise it is critical for all concerned that we have a national system and that we let go of those historical differences that have been created in the past.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I have a question on programs. I assume that the NFF is proactive in identifying industries with unusually high rates of deaths or injury. If that is the case what policies do you put in place, or have you got some policy in place, to identify that, and can you tell me systems you go through in respect of that? What other programs have you at a national level to identify or reduce those rates of injury and death?

Ms HARRIS — We deal with the NFF at a policy level as opposed to an implementation level. We are involved with a number of bodies that have OHS as the focus, and they include Farmsafe Australia, which has a series of policy initiatives. We hope the NFF is driving a revamp of Farmsafe Australia this year to ensure that there are greater funds for that organisation and more focus on policy development.

The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation OHS advisory committee, on which we sit, is also looking at OHS issues. Our involvement in those organisations is effectively identifying the priority areas for change in OHS.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Could you be specific? Can you give an example?

Ms HARRIS — A good example is the child safety on farms initiative. With the ATV research that is being undertaken the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation has just approved some funding on
an issue relating to non-English-speaking workers and the importance of OHS information, particularly in the horticulture industry. The Chemcert training was initiated by organisations including the NFF on the importance of chemical training. We also had noise injury on farms. That research was undertaken last year and there is now a recommendation on how to reduce noise injury on farms. We were heavily involved in the ROP system with tractors a few years ago.

We identify as many of the priority areas as we can and then work with those organisations where we can find the evidence to ensure that we can implement it well on the ground, and we then try to encourage organisations at both state and community levels to implement those. That is where the research and development corporations are so critical. More of them are now introducing funds towards OHS than have previously — for example, I am sitting on an advisory committee on Australian wool innovation which has a focus on training in OHS practices for sheds and shearsers. That type of funding has not come previously on an OHS basis, so the research and development is where that financial commitment is available to us — redirecting more funds to this area which is seen as being most critical.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Did you mention safe play areas?

Ms HARRIS — Yes.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Could you expand on that?

Ms HARRIS — Sure, there is some information in the packs there. A number of years ago it was recognised that child safety on farms and play areas was critical. Last year, in the first phase of child safety on farms, there was a competition for people to show their best child-safe play areas. Some state winners and a national winner have been promoted through the farming community to highlight the importance of child safety. The second phase of child safety on farms focuses particularly on safe play areas. We at RIRDC — I think I am correct — funded some work on introducing booklets and more PR materials on how to design safe play areas for farms. More work is being undertaken on that, which we are supporting, and that is under the auspices of Farmsafe Australia. Our critical role is to ensure that there is maximisation of communication through our network channels and that the information flows down to the farmers themselves; and we use our networks to promote that.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You talk about information that flows down to farmers and the industry. I note Peter mentioned at the start that some of the documentation does not exactly have safe work practices. Is there any policy position from the NFF on this? If not, why not? You are handing out this information — we would all agree that the photos in there are inappropriate — so what policy measures are you putting in place or have you put in place to ensure that this does not continue?

Ms HARRIS — Since that occurred we have asked to approve any photos that go into any documents that are put out with our logo on them. The content in that documentation is fantastic; it is just unfortunate that these photos were utilised on the front cover. We have asked that any material that goes under the banner of a similar style to what has occurred is approved by us.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Will that necessarily follow on through the state organisations?

Ms HARRIS — We can control all the material that has been created at a national level with an organisation that we have connections to. We can control that.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You can control that at a state level?

Ms HARRIS — Yes, because that has been distributed at a national level. Obviously we cannot control anything the VFF does that contains state-specific information, but anything created at a national level such as those documents — there will be more of them — we say we want to see the photos.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am not sure of the linkage between the national body and the VFF. Can’t you tell the VFF it should not be doing that?

Ms HARRIS — We can ask and encourage, but we cannot say to our members, ‘You must do this’. That is a decision they have to make.

Mr McQUILTN — It might be easy now that Peter is not there!
Ms HARRIS — We have an exceptionally good working relationship with VFF. I am usually on the phone to those guys a couple of times a day. A good example is an article that was being constructed on a particular issue yesterday, and to ensure the accuracy of because it was a national issue but with specific impact in Victoria they rang us and said, 'This is what the article is going to say: what do you think?'. So there is very much a two-way communication between the two organisations to ensure that there is consistency in communication and also that there is not the ability to put out something that is inaccurate, so we are hoping to have that control.

If the legislation was consistent and everything we were putting out was at a national level, either working constructively with all the governments or the federal government, it would make life easier because there would be less documentation going out and we could ensure it was correct if less were distributed. That is the key, and, of course, we would save money as well.

Mr ARKLE — Before we move on from Michael’s comments about the communication mechanisms, I want to bring the committee’s attention to NFF’s involvement with Agsafe, which is a national network of rural distributors and resellers. The NFF has taken up a position on the board of Agsafe recently; it is very much trying to improve the independence of the organisation and to get away from being a purely chemical manufacturer to being one with a more holistic perspective on rural safety with primarily a chemical focus. We are looking for an opportunity to broaden that out and see that as a valuable network, having 90 per cent of rural resellers around Australia covered in that network. We are using that to communicate information about the transport of chemicals.

You might have seen the ‘Use it, don’t boot it’ campaign to get people to put chemicals in the back of their utes and not in the family wagons, and things along those lines. We see that as a valuable communication network, so obviously when farmers have immediate contact with resellers — often more and more with the reduction of state extension services — they are becoming very important in an advisory role, so we would see that network as important and something we are looking to utilise more in the future for a range of messages.

Mr INGRAM — The age of farmers across Australia is fairly high, and that creates a number of challenges in occupational health and safety. We have seen that with ATVs and some other farm accidents. How does an organisation like yours deal with that — for example, in a manufacturing or mining industry there would not be too many 90-year-old people working in those industries? How does the organisation deal with that, because that will pose some challenges in trying to maintain safe working environments?

Ms HARRIS — No doubt there is an issue of age. The average age of farmers in Australia is 55.

Mr McQUILTEN — That is a good age!

Ms HARRIS — There is certainly no question. It is something we have turned our minds to and there is an issue about whether we should do specific research on this area. At the same time we cannot be ageist. We cannot ask a farmer to leave the farm simply on the basis of age.

Mr INGRAM — I was not suggesting that.

Ms HARRIS — So we have to be conscious of the fact that we need, perhaps, some information specifically for older farmers in terms of what they may need to consider. There is also another issue, and while it is not totally related, it is to a certain degree: we are having some discussions at a federal level and also, interestingly enough, with some of the banks that are taking an interest in succession planning issues on farms and in assisting farmers in the development of succession plans. That may assist in this particular issue, because there is a consideration, particularly by banks at the moment, that they do not believe there is a proactive approach on succession planning, which obviously may increase their risks. So they are taking an interest in this area.

Mr McQUILTEN — There have been a few problems within the Liberal Party with succession planning as well.

Ms HARRIS — It is obviously an issue, and we have to be mindful of writing information that could be marketed specifically towards the older farmer. But certainly the major issue is that we are not trying to drive these farmers out but rather assisting them in undertaking activities that are consonant with their abilities and so forth.

Mr ARKLE — One concept we were discussing yesterday in preparation for the hearing this morning was the idea of rural champions or farm safety champions, and it is a model that has worked very well in other areas. It is not the regulatory officer who is telling these older farmers how to do things, it is their peers, and they do listen to them. It has been proven to be an effective communication mechanism. It is something NFF will be
looking at with Farmsafe over the next 12 months, but it is certainly something we see as a very valuable initiative to communicate these messages.

The CHAIR — At what point does the NFF see regulations becoming important? The child-safe play areas, for example — I know you have very strong support for them through your press releases and so on, but at what point do you say that every farmhouse should have a child-safe area?

Ms HARRIS — We would not support regulation to that extent, but obviously there needs to be regulation for minimum safety standards. But at the same time, with regulation in particular, you have to police it to ensure that it is being maintained. Now we are talking about farms, and we do not think that is the most practical way of dealing with farm safety. It is a matter of a cultural change and shifts in education that need to be developed over time and the utilisation of mechanisms that are going to be of most interest to a farmer, so obviously child safety is critical.

If they implement good practice at the farmhouse and around the farmhouse for their children, that then may trigger an understanding that maybe they need to be also more safe around their sheds or whatever the case may be. So we certainly do not endorse overregulation. Obviously there need to be some standards of regulation in terms of safety, particularly in relation to employees, but ultimately the most effective way of ensuring that there is better farm safety is going to be through education and training. And as Peter said, the peer network is a particularly important mechanism upon which we can get these activities across.

But the people who have won these awards have really got quite a lot of extensive coverage in terms of the reasons why they undertook those safe-play areas, and we are working with the rural press particularly to try to maximise that coverage over the rest of the summer to ensure that message gets across. But we do not believe regulation is going to be successful in achieving the outcomes we are seeking to achieve.

Mr WALSH — Is the issue of a lack of child-care facilities in our country towns something that has been looked at?

Ms HARRIS — I am not aware that it has been specifically looked at, but certainly it was raised as an issue when we were looking at the child-safety-on-farms initiative, and I am not 100 per cent sure whether or not that was going to be researched; I cannot recall. But certainly there are issues, and it seems to be more the children of farmers in the house as opposed to workers. Nevertheless, there could well be an issue.

Mr WALSH — Why I ask is that a lot of towns in my electorate do not have child-care facilities, which is becoming a very big issue, and if the partner, particularly the wife, wants to go to the doctor, to the hospital or to do something, they cannot leave the children anywhere with a child-care facility, and they have to leave them home on the farm. So it is a big issue.

Ms HARRIS — Certainly no evidence of that specifically has been brought to our attention, but I do know it was raised at a meeting, and they may well be looking at that as part of this initiative, but I just cannot recall off the top of my head.

Mr MITCHELL — Just going back to where you said you do not believe that regulation is the way to go, can you explain that? When you look at something like the ROPS system, where it appears that farmers are not taking up safety issues or things like that until regulation is put in place, what is the NFF doing to be proactive in that way in encouraging farmers to take up these things like safe areas for children? Do you think that farmers need to be treated differently and encouraged to do these things prior to having the legislation put in?

Ms HARRIS — I certainly think no business person is any different, whether they are a farmer, a retailer, a hotelier or whatever. Obviously, in the main business and industry would prefer there was less regulation, and we encourage people to take it up, but many of the issues we are talking about are cost related. ROPS for tractors was an expensive process, and so therefore there was the assistance provided in ensuring that ROPS was implemented for tractors. So in many of these areas we are talking about, it is the expense that limits the farmers opportunity to ensure that they do it on a proactive basis.

For example, the New South Wales legislation that is currently being introduced with the need for mandatory training has been a huge cost impost on farmers, it has been massive, and there have been some considerable frustrations about that. It will be interesting to see, because it is certainly our belief that it is not going to improve anything in New South Wales simply by forcing farmers to do mandatory training for a day, and they will only get their backs up about it as opposed to trying to be proactive and understanding and showing farmers that if they get
good OHS practices on their properties, both in terms of themselves and their workers, then their productivity is going to be greater and their costs are going to be reduced through workers compensation premiums, personal injury premiums and the like.

So there are ways and means by which we can create incentives for people to implement this as opposed to regulation, which is really not going to assist in terms of that cultural shift we are trying to achieve in terms of OHS. So we certainly do not believe that regulation is the answer, but at the same time, as I stated previously, there is no question that you need minimum standards to ensure they are maintained, but you have to be very, very careful in going beyond that.

Mr ARKLE — It is fairly instructive that the committee has actually paralleled the approach or contrasted the approach taken between New South Wales and Victoria in this area. Obviously I am more familiar with the chemical side of things, but the committee may be aware that the New South Wales pesticides act, which was brought in mid-last year, requiring mandatory training for the use of all pesticides, basically across the board no matter what you are talking about compared to the Victorian approach, which is very much risk based, looking at the S7 poisons only for permits and requirements.

Enforcement is a big issue, and the New South Wales Environment Protection Authority has four enforcement officers who basically knock on doors at random around the state and hand out fines, infringement notices. The approach that has been taken in Victoria has been much more collaborative and cooperative, where Worksafe inspectors actually go onto a farm and hand out breach notices, but rather than fining people they are actually working with farmers to identify opportunities to improve things. So it is all about continuous improvement as opposed to restrictive regulation. So I do not think NFF is anti regulation, we are just pro-good regulation, which we think is the answer, with supporting mechanisms in place.

Mr McQUILLEN — And pro-Victorian policies on a number of these issues, which is good to see.

Ms HARRIS — In comparison to other jurisdictions.

Mr WALSH — The Kennett government set things up well, John.

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time. Thank you very much. I think we could keep on talking for the rest of the day and asking questions, but it has been very useful, and we appreciate your time and effort. Thank you.

Ms HARRIS — Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — There will be a copy of the transcript provided in about a fortnight, and you can correct any obvious errors in fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Ms HARRIS — Thank you.

Mr ARKLE — Good luck with the inquiry.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.