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
Ms V. Drendel, Secretary, Netherby Lorquon VFF Landcare Group (affirmed).
The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this committee under the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise everybody present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

Vanessa, for the purposes of receiving a transcript in a couple of weeks time, would you mind giving us your full name and address and advising us whether you are representing an organisation, and in what capacity, or whether you are presenting as an individual?

Ms DRENDEL — My name is Vanessa Drendel. My address is RMB 1048 Nhill Netherby Road, Piramimma, 3418. I am here as a representative of the Netherby Lorquon VFF Landcare Group.

The CHAIR — If you would give us a statement for 5 minutes or so, afterwards we will ask some questions.

Ms DRENDEL — I looked at the topic when Kristen contacted me and I thought I would pick something that is close to my heart, I suppose, as a mother and as a primary producer, which is children and farm safety.

A farm is a home, a recreational area and a workplace. Putting up a fence provides a physical barrier but not a solution — the farm gate is often left open. Many farmers take their children to the office with them. This is through either lack of child care or ignorance or just simply because they perceive it as something they can do. Safety practices and principles within the farming sector are often not acknowledged, through either ignorance, restricted financial resources, perceived scare tactics or information that is heard second hand. A lot of times it takes only a small modification to the way something is done to make things safer, but often this is overlooked or seen to be not needed. I often hear, ‘What’s wrong with doing that? My father did it that way’ or ‘My brother did it that way’. Children play, and they mimic what they see their parents and their peers do. Sometimes in a farming atmosphere that is not the correct thing to have happen.

Children on farms have a very balanced view of life. They have a very good perception of right and wrong, but one scenario where this breaks down is when town friends or relatives come to visit. As a result the basics of right and wrong that have been drilled into them by their parents are often overlooked in favour of ‘Let’s do it’. Kids are kids. On a personal level, I have experienced this. As every parent knows, you can talk until you are blue in the face, but no matter how well you think you have explained something sometimes the message does not get through or is ignored.

There are also peak times and seasons within a farming enterprise where safety is often forgotten or placed lower on priority because of the need to get a crop in, for example, or a harvest off. Children often feel the need to have to contribute somehow to lift the burden from mum and dad. Just because your child grew up sitting on your knee driving the farm ute does not mean that same child at age 10 should be sent down the paddock with a ute and bin, but it happens. Farmers do not perceive that that is a risk because it is a mindset that has gone from generation to generation. A lot of times it is not perceived as a risk, because a farm is sometimes not perceived as a business. I would not allow my husband to take my children into his workplace, the same way that someone who works in a steel mill would not take their four-year-old to work. There seem to be two mindsets against what is a safe workplace and what is just a family farming enterprise. This has to change.

The media often plays a negative role in communicating a negligent farm safety message. Recent articles in the Herald Sun and the Weekly Times about four-wheel motorbikes highlighted that these articles do not actually quote fact, but they are widely read. The tragedy with that is that, although they present things that are scare tactics in a negative way, they grab people’s attention, therefore they sell copies. But when their fact does not add up when you look into it, a lot of times farmers read it, and because they have not bothered to research it a bit further, they say, ‘Oh yes, it cannot happen to me’. It is that continual mentality. The media also needs to be encouraged to sell a positive farm safety message. In the past 12 months I have not read one article on positive farm safety practices, and I am talking rurally here, in all the rural farmer handbooks that you kind of get forced to read.

I realise human tragedy, especially when children are involved, sells papers, but what about the articles that encourage people to facilitate change? How can we get the media on our side? When you read something that
happens tragically to a child on a farm your first reaction is to ask, ‘How could their parents let that happen?’. Your second reaction is, ‘It will not happen to me’. There is an ‘it-will-not-happen-to-me’, ‘I-am-so-careful’ and ‘Little-Johnny-will-not-go-and-do-that’ mentality, but little Johnny does go and do that. We all need to be educated to recognise that it can happen to us.

We need to bring about positive, solid change with children on farms. There is no one solution to making a farm 100 per cent safe for children or ourselves. The only way you can do that is to separate a farming residence from a farming enterprise, but most farmers perceive being farmers as being not only an economic profession but also a lifestyle. If you look back two generations you will find that it was a holistic chickens-in-the-yard, milk-the-cow approach to life, and you sustained a living off the land. These days we have bigger machinery and bigger overheads, and with children on farms farm safety has been put on the backburner, and we have had drought. People are reluctant to form ties with their VFF any more. They tend to be walking away, especially in our area, from small VFF cell groups, where you could target farmers, and going to a more regionally based VFF group which is more focused on bigger issues of occupational health and safety. For example, topical out our way at the moment is how much it is going to cost us to put barriers around our fuel. There is a bit of a scare mentality going through our district that suddenly farmers who have a few wonky ladders are not going to be delivered fuel. That is their priority coming up to our growing season when we have to get the crop in.

We have to address the topic of children and farm safety on several levels, and this also interacts with, as the previous speaker said, a mindset for either my generation or the next generation. I hope my generation will embrace it, because they have children who they perceive as going onto the family farm. There are issues with machinery dealerships’ research and development and better communication. A lot of times guards are removed from machinery to make it more operational in the field, and the safety of the user is not taken into consideration. A lot has to go to change that mentality. In my farming area I see the three biggest accidents involve augers, headers and slashers. I have seen quite horrific things that nearly happened, but I can see those things nearly happen every harvest, and nothing changes.

From an educational point of view, although I see some aspects of farm safety as being law — for example, your rollover bars on tractors — I am also seeing the Farmsafe message being delivered to children no differently than such programs as Vicswim — that is, commencing when children are young and involving parental interaction. It should be a lifestyle change and a mind change. Farmsafe education programs need to be region specific. Although the message is similar, the workplace and type of farming enterprise is not a one-size-fits-all message, that will never get across. There are many resources already written on farm safety by such groups as the CFA, the VFF, Farmsafe Victoria and the education department, but what all these things lack is unity; no-one has ever bothered to bring them all together.

Practical, hands-on field days can work. I tried through our Landcare group to call two meetings for guys to attend a Farmsafe evening. I got Workcover and numerous people banging down the door to attend, but nobody wanted to go. They all saw it as, ‘My God! They are going to come onto our farms! Oh no! Vanessa, get them away!’. That was the mentality. There were four women who said, ‘Yes, we will come’. Blokes did not want a bar of it, but the women could see the value in it. So then I decided I would run a Farmsafe day for kids, and I will get to that a bit later, but that was my only way of getting my message across in a small rural community. Practical, hands-on field days pertaining to farm safety are going to be the most effective way to convey a message which is a remembered message.

Farming women are often undervalued for their opinion and input when looking at issues of farm safety, but we end up being the primary caregivers when something goes wrong on the farm. Accidents happen, and being mothers we are often more perceptive to the risks than our husbands. We also manage to balance the karma within the home. When you are dealing with contentious issues, such as farm safety and occupational health and safety, and you say something about risk management to a farmer, he is going to run away. But if you talk to a farmer’s wife, she knows these things. She has dealt with them on a myriad of levels, whether they be a kindergarten, a primary school or the local jazz ballet club — they have all been addressed. Whereas with the things that the boys address — and I intend no sexism in this — they have a totally different mindset.

Available Farmsafe funding in the past has been through the VFF. To me this is not the most practical way of channelling what little money there is into something that is needed so badly within our rural communities. Not enough rural groups and organisations were aware that the VFF funded Farmsafe activities. There is a need for region-specific facilitators — for example, in broadacre cropping areas — whatever — who are divided into
task-specific areas. A facilitator in that area, even if they work part time, could facilitate coordination within the community.

I had a coordinator visit me a few weeks ago. Sadly he knew nothing about my particular farming safety. He could not provide me with information on running a child-oriented Farmsafe day. His focus was on resourcing the needs of a huge area. There are limited budgets. He was dealing with workers and unions, and there was no focus on a primary concern. I spent 90 minutes of my time with him, and I guarantee you that he learnt more from me than I got from him. He took notes madly. I just sat there, nodding and thinking, ‘When is this guy going to go?’ He was absolutely no use to me.

Rural primary schools and smaller schools often miss out on the chance to participate in Farmsafe days simply by their remoteness, but they are the ones that need it the most. Most programs have such a tight budget that the bigger schools do to not benefit, simply because of the numbers.

On a positive note, I ran a Farmsafe day. Wendy Altmann probably mentioned it, because I helped her run a bigger one in Nhill. Just for your interest, gentlemen, I had 60 children attend from two remote schools. They participated in the day. I had 85 per cent of the farmers turn up. Of that 85 per cent, I think every dad was there. I had the children broken up into small groups and facilitated through each activity by a group leader. I made sure adults accompanied. It was totally, ‘Be there with little Johnny or little Cindy’. Groups such as the Country Fire Authority, police, Department of Sustainability and Environment, child health agencies, Ambulance Victoria and Workcover jumped at the idea of participating in this day. I had guys drive from Bendigo. Farmers were encouraged to bring along machinery and talk about it with the children. We had things there that, in the normal context, if you had turned them on and put a stranger beside them someone would have fined you. They were there to give topical conversation and to create a thought process. Because we could not get the fathers to come along and talk about farm machinery safety and that, by bringing their children and the fathers actually seeing through their children’s eyes, it made the farmers think, which was my whole intention for the day.

Interaction was positive in a non-threatening environment. Farmers were happy to discuss farm safety aspects amongst themselves with the Farmsafe rep. He presented himself and his message in a non-threatening way throughout the day. Because this event was community driven, everyone who participated had a form of ownership; therefore they were willing to be there. Adults were encouraged to, and did, stay after the school program day had ended to listen to the group speakers speak at an adult level to adults. Farmers admitted there were a lot of farm safety issues they had not perceived or addressed simply because they had not identified them as a risk. They would now make changes to the way they did things. Perhaps from that Farmsafe day I provided a lot of other organisations with information on how to do it.

The one negative was that when I actually found out that there was funding available I had to wait six months to access funds. I am not talking about a lot of funds here, gentlemen; I am talking about $600, which I actually just paid myself and reimbursed myself for later. That is the budget that this program ran on. I think it was only a couple of thousand dollars for the whole of Victoria. Why is something so important so unknown? I am pretty community savvy. I have accessed state and federal funds before, but I knew nothing of this. I am a member of the VFF, and I am very high up in Landcare — I knew nothing of it. It took an email being inadvertently sent to me from someone else for me to pick up that a day had been run at Kerang. I actually contacted the guy at Kerang, rang out of the blue, and said, ‘Hello, this is me. How did you get this?’.

In closing, I would like to say that you can write a book on farm safety practices, you can impose fines, you can make examples. These same messages can, however, be delivered in a non-threatening and lasting way by utilising and protecting one of our most valuable resources — our children. Thank you.

Mr INGRAM — Vanessa, thank you for a very thoughtful, detailed and high-quality presentation. I think you have given us some serious food for thought in that. Obviously the committee has contacted you, and our briefing notes state that you made the comment that country people are sick of things coming from Collins Street. I presume that that is a comment you made. Some of your ideas are around trying to deliver things at a local level. Obviously we are going to write a book. How do we make what we write and the recommendations we make deliverable to a local level? Obviously we have to try to address the risks. You have highlighted the young people on farms. We have to try to get it right across and try to get some outcomes. How can we make it so that we can deliver it, so that it is not seen as just coming from Collins Street or Spring Street?
Ms DRENDEL — I do not think you can. I think my comment on Collins Street was a little bit tongue in cheek simply because that is bantered around our community a lot. What I think farmers want, especially in conveying farm safety directives or messages, is plain English, gentlemen. Cut to the chase, just whack it to thumb tags, and just tell it as it is. Please don’t mask it in big words. I am not speaking to anyone’s detriment here, but a lot of farmers will not tolerate documents that they have to turn sideways to try to understand them. I think they need it put cleanly and simply. They need thoughts directed to them, thoughts from you and possible solutions. It is a big issue, and it is not going to go away. If we can address this issue in slices, we may stand a chance of winning the battle.

Mr MITCHELL — Vanessa that was very enlightening, what you said. It was very frank, and I appreciate that. How do you think that women, particularly women on farms, can play a more direct role? We have heard a few people tell us that probably the best way in is through the back door and to get on to the wife, who usually does the financials and the academic side of things and probably has a better understanding of insurances and Workcover and all those sorts of things. How can we involve them more and bring them in?

Ms DRENDEL — That is a hard one. I have often thought about that, because I try to get to women involved with different things. I find that often women are reluctant, simply because for so long they have perceived that farming is really a man’s world. In the last 10 years I would say that women have had avenues in which to address these things, whether it is through the women’s forums that are often run in local towns or the leadership committees that are now in place. I think we need to look at utilising things like catchment management authorities, probably not so much local councils because they are down on resources. Forget the Country Women’s Association. What we need to do is find some sort of mentorship to encourage women to come out and speak. You would be surprised at how many women are right up with occupational health and safety. They are making positive changes on their farms, whether it is convincing their husbands that the $80 000 they are just about to spend to make silos safer is a good thing or other things, they do it.

Where I think we fall down is that the VFF is perceived as being a very male-orientated organisation. The VFF does absolutely wonderful things across the board. From my broadacre cropping perspective, there are not a lot of women in the VFF from that perspective; they are mainly sheep and cattle, or mainly sheep, which is a bit more passive. I think it is the machinery mentality: girls and machines don’t go. I think that if somewhere through the VFF we could foster women on farms and target those people to then bring out the message — —

I do not know the answer to that one. I think that that is posed through so many groups: how do we get women to participate?

The CHAIR — Vanessa, you are actively involved in Landcare and you talked about the small cell groups of the VFF member farmers not being active or around any more. Landcare groups are certainly very local and active across most of our areas. Do you see a role for Landcare in perhaps actually delivering a lot of this message, because it actually is a mix between the male and the female? As you know, it is very effectively said to farmers, ‘You look after your environment, you get productivity and profitability benefits’, which I think Barry talked about before. If there can be an OHS message though that as well, is there a possibility there?

Ms DRENDEL — I think there is. With Landcare these days you have to deal with OHS issues. If I took you six guys outside to plant some trees, being nominated through our Landcare group, I would have to tell you that if there was a puddle on the ground you potentially could fall over and drown. Through my course I learnt that I have to do risk management before I take anyone anywhere — it has just come through the board that it has been changed with our change in insurance. With Landcare and Topcrop, there are a lot of avenues that we can delve into that can be incorporated into what is already being facilitated to get a message across.

The CHAIR — Obviously Beecheck is a common one in my area of the state, with lots of people getting involved. The OHS message is important. When you talked about field days for farm safety, were you talking specifically about farm safety?

Ms DRENDEL — Specific, absolutely specific. At the moment I am trying to liaise a bus trip for our local Landcare group and associated members to go to a few machinery dealerships and speak to them about their development of new machinery against — —
They develop an innovation to make the machine function better, but safety is still an issue. They can comply with your normal safety regulations — as in ladders, guards and whatever — but half of those come off when they come back to the farm. I walked through our shed yesterday. We do not have machinery under three years old — it is all from this year, last year or the year before. There are 43 guards sitting in the shed, and I like to think that we are a farm-savvy organisation that is aware of safety. I had not known that my husband has ripped 43 guards off machinery in three years.

The CHAIR — Is there a system, through the VFF, the Farmsafe Alliance or Landcare through which they recommend that these products and pieces of equipment are really practical and great for farm safety and that the guards do not get in your way? Have they sorted out that problem? Is there an actual — —

Ms DRENDEL — Now they are bringing out machinery that addresses those issues, but not all farmers are fortunate enough to be able to update their machinery every two or three years. There is a joke in our house that I am the oldest acquisition on our farm, because every other piece of machinery postdates me. It is the farmers who fall in the middle between having to combine innovative technology to keep up with farming practices against farmers similar to my husband. We have just had GPS put on our tractor so we can control steer. It is the ones who are in the middle, those who are dealing with machinery. There is a lot of second-hand machinery that may have been modified or has been sold prior to the law requiring that every piece of machinery has to have a guard put back on it before you can resell it. I do not know how you address that; I really do not. It is a major OHS issue, but it is a community issue as well.

The CHAIR — You said that on your own farm you do not let your children go out into the workplace whatsoever. How do you define that, because as you know a farm is a house and all the work sheds are usually close to it?

Ms DRENDEL — I should correct that and not say ‘whatsoever’. Our workshop is probably as far away as the bitumen road. I have a 13-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son, and my son is not allowed to go down to that shed to his father without first telling me. He has a set of rules. This sounds pretty hard, but I tell him, ‘If there is welding or this and that going on, you turn round and come back, no matter how good it seems’. I cannot completely stop my children from participating, because that is our life, but I can minimise the risk by being a parent. What I will not let my child do at times my husband sees no harm in. We come from two different worlds. I was not brought up on a farm; I married into one.

I will give you an example that probably still gives me nightmares. I was addressing an organisation in Horsham one day, and I had left my son with my husband. He had him from the time school finished till I got home at about 6 o’clock. I said to my husband before I left, ‘Can you pick him up? What will you be doing?’ He said, ‘No, that is cool. I am organising the shed and just cleaning up’. I walked inside and my son said, ‘Mummy, I got 16 stitches, two snakes and a lollipop from Dr Anderson!’ I looked at my husband and said, ‘My God! What did you do to my child?’ He said that he ran into a piece of agricultural equipment because my husband was playing with him and they were just mucking around. But that brought home to me that no matter what risk management I did before I left, accidents could still happen. My husband is probably really careful because I am constantly at him, and I know a lot of parents who are the same way. On the other hand my 9-year-old can drive a semitrailer. It is a bad thing for me to sit here and say that he can, but I came to the realisation a few years ago that my children did not know how to cross the road, but my 10-year-old daughter could drive a 400-horsepower tractor out of the shed and back it up to a piece of machinery. Now what did that say about me? You can educate — and I am not a dumb person — but it happens, and you do not realise the risk that you are putting yourself and your children at. Just because she is in a tractor, the door is shut and she has a seat-belt on, she is still not safe. She is still a kid.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much again, Vanessa. That was great.

Witness withdrew.