CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Melbourne – 20 January 2004

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Mr G. Hallihan , Executive Officer, Primary Skills Victoria (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome, Greg. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings by oath or affirmation. I wish to advise 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 by witnesses outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. Our inquiry is into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms. Thank you for giving us your time today. I will ask you now to either take an oath or make an affirmation.

Mr HALLIHAN — My full name is Greg Hallihan of Primary Skills Victoria, the industry training board, at Skipping Girl Place, Abbotsford. I am the executive officer of that organisation.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become evidence for public hearing in due course. Would you like to make a statement for 10 minutes or so and then the committee will ask you some questions.

Mr HALLIHAN — Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. I am here today more by way of providing some information on the educational side. As I understand it you have had a fair bit of information from manufacturers of machinery, from associations and unions, but this may give you a better perspective of how the education system would work in respect of current training in occupational health and safety; but also, if there were a decision to move further into providing courses or enhancing courses, how that may or may not work.

By way of introduction, Primary Skills Victoria is an industry training board. We are part of both a state and national network of industry training boards. We have a role to advise governments, both state and federal, through our board, which has representation from the VFF, the unions and other key commodity groups such as Seafood Industry Victoria, as to what training may be required in the future, what level it should be targeted at and what standard that training should be at. We have purely an advisory function; we do not have a capacity to direct, just to suggest. Clearly we have the desire to see that training is of high quality, that it is available at appropriate times, venues and locations, which obviously for us, being a rural-based ITAB, is fairly important. To some degree we maintain the quality by running sector reference groups, which bring the key industry parties and TAFE providers, whether they be public or private, and the union, together to try to find common understandings and goals in respect to training. The committee will see the membership on page 5 of the submission; it is a fairly broad membership within primary industries in Victoria. I believe some people on our board have already presented before this committee.

Within Victoria, and in fact nationally, training packages are the main tools that drive training. Many of you may have heard of those; in the old days it was called curriculum and various other names but now are called training packages. Within those training packages are what are called competencies, and they are based on job activities. So they are very much to do with the doing rather than just the knowledge of or describing what should be done. This convention was set up through the national committees, so that unless it actually has a doing function it is hard to get a competency developed or written, which, as I go along, will explain why occupational health and safety seems to fall through the cracks to some degree.

The first national training package for the rural industries was developed, and it ran in 1999. That covers levels of qualification from level 1 to 6, level 1 being basically the farmhand or someone who is directed specifically to do a task, to level 6, which is someone who is directing or developing policy or general directions — very much the farm manager, or owner in our case. As I mentioned, the competencies are based on activities. There are a huge number of competencies developed within the rural area, wherever possible, tying into a national system. So in the case of occupational health and safety there would be a push within the system to use a national competency from another training package if there was one already in existence. That has been reflected to some degree in the training material that is available for registered training organisations (RTOs) and many others wanting to get funding for training to take place. Having said that, there are basically two streams of occupational health and safety competencies developed through the system, through the national and consequently the state. One is the generic set, which you will see at page 6 of our submission, and they are listed at levels 2, 3, 4 and 5.

The committee will notice that the titles are very generically termed, such as: follow occupational health and safety procedures; carry out occupational health and safety procedures at level 3; at level 4, implement and monitor enterprise and occupational health and safety programs; also at 4, minimise the use of chemicals; at level 5, establish and maintain the occupational health and safety program, and also develop and manage a chemical use strategy. They are the only specific occupational health and safety units available within the Rural Train Package and within the state system as such. There are some state-accredited courses that the committee might have heard
of, like Chemcert, and courses of that ilk, which are not national; although they are tied to a national accreditation they are not part of the national system, but they are still used within the state and are funded by the state government at various levels.

The other level of occupational health and safety which caused a fair bit of debate when the training packages were being developed was that the occupational health and safety of any activity be integrated within the delivery of a competency. So if you are looking at tractor driving, for instance, rather than having a specific occupational health and safety unit on tractor driving covering what many of us would have know as the DOL, or Department of Labour, certificates, as they were known, the intent is that it be taught as part of the competency. That decision was made because there was a tendency to make occupational health and safety fairly dry and boring. If anyone here has ever undertaken an occupational health and safety unit, they would know that can very easily be the case. By integrating it within the delivery of a competency there was a way of making it more interesting and more relevant. In hindsight there has been a tendency that often occupational health and safety training tied to a specific competency like tractor driving or all-terrain vehicles, or even chemical use to some degree, sometimes gets left behind because it is not specifically stated within the competency apart from saying ‘occupational health and safety on this equipment needs to be taken into account’ — that is about the general statement of it. That then relies on the competency and the creativity of the instructor or teacher in communicating that tractor driver competency as to how occupational health and safety is interpreted from there.

As I mentioned, there are state-based courses which fall slightly outside the national system but which are still directed to occupational health and safety. That also includes some university courses which are specific to occupational health and safety which are funded through the federal system.

I have mentioned the main goal of the board: promoting and involvement in areas like the Victorian Farm Safety Training Centre and Chemcert, which our board has some representation on; the Seafood Industry Victoria, through John Sealey, who is doing work on personal flotation devices, predeckhand training; and Sam Beechey, who I believe has already spoken to the committee and presented a paper.

As to the quality of training, Primary Skills Victoria has no formal capacity to improve the quality of training, except through advice. That is done through the Australian quality training framework and all training is required to meet those standards. The problem with this is it ends up being a compliance-driven system of compliance rather than looking at the quality of delivery. We have suggested in our paper that the quality of delivery could be enhanced by using industry experts — they could be through the Victorian Farmers Federation or through unions, or they could be through Primary Skills Victoria industry liaison officers — to ensure the standards and quality of delivery are consistent across the state and not just focusing on the compliance. The other thing we use are the moderation groups, as I mentioned earlier, where we bring the parties together.

Just to give some personal observations, in respect to strategies for government. The committee is most probably aware that 95 per cent of the coverage we have are small businesses of five people or fewer. I am sure that has come through. The issue of home and work being in the same location presents a specific complication in respect to workplace safety. Obviously many times the farmers are doing what most of us in the metropolitan area would do — activities that are fairly safe, like wheeling around a wheelbarrow of bricks — but in a farming context where you are driving a tractor doing a similar things of carting it all around to the back of the house presents a whole range of and a different degree of problems, as a friend of mine found out.

The board believes there is a capacity within the system to meet some of the issues in respect to occupational health and safety and also the quality of delivery within the training system, and that exists with existing RTOs or industry-based farmers that can actually demonstrate what occupational health and safety should be like and how it should be integrated within the farm.

The system over the last period has lost substantial funding, particularly to regional institutes. As a consequence the institutes tend to shut down their own activities in respect to having farms or practical locations and tend to work on farm, wherever possible. This has a positive aspect in one sense in that it can remove staid old activities that may have existed in TAFE institutes or registered training organisations in times past; but it also takes away the development of structures and systems that can be a good demonstration of what can be done if the money and resources are available. The funding has reduced that capacity.

In the old days you could have sent somebody to Longeranong or Dookie or a place of that nature and they would have seen a well-established workshop up to the finest Australian standards for occupational health and safety. That is now not the case because the capacity is not there any more, and we have moved away from providing that
service. Often when you move on farm, which is where a lot of the training takes place now, the farmer does not have the capacity always to have everything up to the finest and last detail of what it should be. Our suggestion is that the infrastructure is there, it just needs to be regrown. There is the capacity to develop teachers’ expertise in occupational health and safety specifically and start up some form of moderation collegial group that works across silos, whether those silos be within the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance, within registered training organisations or whether they be on farms or farming organisations like the Birchip Cropping Group, or groups like that. I think there is capacity. It just needs to be focused on a bit more and given a bit more support in helping to change the attitudes, not just the legislative issues of only ticking the boxes or punitive action, so that farm safety grows into the future as an integral part of the training delivery. That is a quick thumbnail sketch of what we are involved in.

Mr WALSH — You speak in your submission about some interaction between the local learning and employment networks (LLENs) and yourself in training. Do we run the risk that we have too many different people out there doing similar stuff?

Mr HALLIHAN — With respect to training?

Mr WALSH — In respect to confusing the market, because the LLENs have a particular purpose in trying to retain people in the education system. Do you think that starts to confuse people?

Mr HALLIHAN — I think the LLENs have a role to play in respect to education and training, but I do not think they necessarily have a specific role to play in respect of this. I think there are structures out there that can be used in existing RTOs and within the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance and the Australian Farm Safety Training Centre. There are a number of groups out there that possibly need to be coordinated more closely and resourced a little bit better to make sure that access by farmers to occupational health and safety training is relevant and commonsense and not driven by a big stick, but to really show them that there is good sense in doing things in certain ways. I think that capacity is there.

Dr NAPTHINE — Who funds most of the training that is conducted under this umbrella?

Mr HALLIHAN — Funding of training within the state is predominantly through the state government. It is funded to registered training organisations — in lay terms, TAFEs — whether they be public or private. That funding is made up from both state and federal coffers. That is the majority of the training funding that is made available. In respect to the farm, particularly in relation to the older farmers, there is an initiative called Farmbis, which is funded federally and also by the state, through the primary industry department. That provides substantial training dollars. That has been used quite successfully with the older farmers to improve occupational health and safety because it is tied to real outcomes, but also meaningful needs that they have, such as tying the occupational health and safety to things like Beefcheck or Target 10. These are all specific farmer programs usually to do with quality assurance and management, but occupational health and safety is integral within that delivery. There is a concern within the board that funding for Farmbis has still not been finally approved within the state. It seems to have some summary approval federally, but it is matched dollar-for-dollar by the state, and if that were to be lost that would effectively, to give you an idea, take an institution like Melbourne University out of agricultural delivery, which would be a substantial loss to the system.

Mr WALSH — Are you saying that Farmbis funding would take Melbourne University out of agricultural teaching?

Mr HALLIHAN — No, it would not take Melbourne University out. I am saying that in comparable size, it would be like taking an institute of the size of Melbourne University out of the system. So Farmbis is a critical factor in respect to rural delivery of training.

Dr NAPTHINE — What is your suggestion about how we can improve understanding and skills in occupational health and safety on farms across Victoria?

Mr HALLIHAN — I think, firstly, the best relationship is the one-to-one relationship, if you use the huge number of teachers, trainers, or whatever you want to call them, if you gain access to those and enhance their capacity in occupational health and safety, build their skills and their preparedness to work with each other and share their resources and capacities, I think you would have most probably three or four times the number of Workcover inspectors you have on the ground, and you are catching farmers and other participants, both young and old, at the formative end where they are developing their skills and knowledge rather than trying to change bad habits. I think that is a major one. I think there are organisations within the structures that could take a role in doing that.
Dr NAPTHINE — How do you make occupational health and safety sexy? At the moment, if you talk to most primary producers and the like it is right at the back of the queue compared to perhaps learning more about how to breed better sheep, grow better vegetables or use water more efficiently. All those things are seen as front-of-the-mind issues; occupational health and safety is one of those things that they do not see as a front-of-mind concern. How do you put it up there?

Mr HALLIHAN — You used the term ‘sexy’. You have just answered the question: you make it relate to all those others. Farmers want to know that occupational health and safety is going to add value to their farms — that it will make it safe but it will also add value. They need to see it is going to make their life and their family’s lives better. You need to show them that there is capacity to do that. That is why we suggestion setting up some best-example farms that show they are working and that it does work, so they can see in a commonsense way that it really does work to put on a hardhat on an all-terrain vehicle, that it does really work to use chemicals appropriately, and all of those examples. That is how you do it — by example. If you cannot show an example of it then you have a lost cause.

The CHAIR — You were talking about teachers needing to have occupational health and safety capacities. Within primary industries specifically there seems to be a preference to have real farmers also being part of the actual training so that farmers feel they are actually talking to someone who knows the types of things they are going through. Are you factoring that into your view?

Mr HALLIHAN — Yes. The way that delivery of training currently occurs, the person who signs off the competency has to be competent in that activity. Consequently often it is farmers who are involved in signing off someone who has been competent in a specific certificate or even a competency. They have an integral role to play. The other, about leading by example, is true there too. My observation is that many farmers do not like setting themselves up as the expert, as the person who has all the answers and the rest of it. Often they undervalue what they have to offer in respect to training and the skills and capacities they have, so they have to be an integral part of it.

The CHAIR — One of the factors that seems to come up regularly in submissions is that a lot of accidents are occurring to people in the older age bracket. Has there been any thought about any kind of training for older farmers, for example, retraining and that sort of thing? Is there anything available there?

Mr HALLIHAN — Farmbiz has met a greater need in the older farmer cohort than the traditional delivery of certificates through TAFEs or RTOs, and you can see that statistically. Most of the time it is because it brings that cohort together. It might be looking at a specific course, and it could be as simple as doing a financial management course, but the sharing that goes on between farmers is seen to be of great value and that is clearly seen time and time again in evaluations. The mainstream TAFEs and RTOs tend not to use their normal delivery dollars to target that cohort, and it seems to be left to Farmbiz which is in a sense to one side of the mainstream delivery. The other thing that is clear is that older farmers do not want to do certificates as such. They want an immediate in and out. They say, ‘I have a problem here, I need a solution. I will spend the time to do that and then I will move back’. So it is a shopping list type of delivery.

The CHAIR — The other area of high representation is risk analysis on farms. Have any kinds of training or courses been produced in regard to occupational health and safety or risk management in those particular areas?

Mr HALLIHAN — What has been done is that RTOs will pick one or a number of those competencies that I read out before and package and customise them to suit a particular client need, and each RTO or TAFE has the capacity to do that. Depending on how creative the RTO is, some do it very well and some do it very poorly. Does that answer the question?

The CHAIR — Yes and no.

Mr HALLIHAN — There are courses out there that are specifically run and accredited by each institute which meet some or a number of occupational health and safety requirements like risk assessment or chemical application or use. Within the system they have the capacity to do that in their own right and accredit the course in their own right. As to the standard, you could question that sometimes because there seems to be a lack of bringing all the parties together to make sure there is a common understanding of the operation of ATVs through to the application of chemicals, although to a large degree Chemcert does a fairly good job of maintaining standards in respect of chemical application.
Dr NAPTHINE — Say I am a young mother on a farm with three children under seven years, I have read these statistics about accident rates or high mortality of children on farms and I want to know whether my farm is safe. How can I do some sort of training or assessment, or can I learn how to assess the hazard analysis and the identification of risks and what I can do about them on my farm?

Mr HALLIHAN — You could go to a regional TAFE which may give you a generic form of auditing for the workplace, and it may be customised to pick up the peculiarities with respect to farms. Ballarat has a safety training centre which will give you access to auditing and attending a course to do that as well. The VFF would also be a location where you could go to see what access it has for auditing and safety on farms. So that is where you would end up. I need to say too that the best advocates for training that we have found for maintaining quality and standards on farms are the mums and the female partners of farmers. They engage in it very well and fervently and are prepared to spend a fair bit of time in doing so.

The CHAIR — Going back to Denis’s question and taking it a bit further, do you think there is room for improvement for access to knowledge about where people can go to get farm safety training or farm training courses? My electorate office dealt with a situation recently where I ended up going through the secretariat here to find out where a person could go and in the end there was a fairly local solution, but that local solution was not easy to find. Are there any suggestions about how we can improve access to those things for people?

Mr HALLIHAN — I think you are right. I do not think it is clear or obvious where you can go for the specific training you may need, so I think there is a need to establish a physical location or some sort of digital portal or something like that to help direct people to meet that specific need, particularly in the rural context. You can go to many local RTOs that will say, ‘Yes, I can teach you about issues in respect of occupational health and safety’, but it will be very generic and it will be the basic principles of eliminating or avoiding the hazard. That does not help you very much if it has not taught you the proper way to use an ATV or what you should do before hopping on to a tractor. They both have to go hand in hand, but there is an opportunity for that to exist and there are a number of locations in which that could reside at this point in time which would help everyone.

The CHAIR — Greg, thank you very much for providing us with your information in the time available today. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. If there are any obvious errors of fact you may correct them, but nothing of substance.

Witness withdrew.