RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Warrnambool – 10 March 2004

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Ms N. Pye, Dairy Farmer.
Ms PYE — Naomi Pye, a dairy farmer, from 4404 Woolsthorpe Road, Bessiebelle 3304. I am also a deliverer of the Managing Farm Safety training program. It is probably as much in that capacity that I wanted to come along and listen and have a few words.

We find that probably the biggest driver at the moment for getting farmers to our programs are those who have started to employ and they are scared stiff of Worksafe and Workcover and litigation. And that is what they perceive farm safety to be all about: protecting themselves from litigation, which is a real issue and a barrier to them actually doing things for themselves. Once we get past that and say, ‘Hang on a minute, we are really about making the farm safe for everybody’, then they start to be much more positive in how they look at the program.

In the last couple of years we have worked through it from it being very much in the classroom with a little bit of work of going out and looking at the shed to what we have at the moment. We are trialling programs where we have one day going through the paperwork and the whys and the what-fors and then the second day — I am in the process at the moment of actually visiting the farms one at a time — we sit down with all the workers and the owners and actually do a farm audit. We walk through the farm, look at the issues they have, talk to them about what they think are the issues and try and come up with plans of action to deal with the issues. For instance, in a dairy one of the major hazards is hot water. We are dealing with 90-degree temperature hot water, and 70-degree water will burn you within a second to a third-degree burn, so 90 degrees can really severely damage legs and arms if it gets on them. Plus you combine that with acid and alkaline detergents and you are looking at really serious injuries if things go wrong. So we walk around and look and talk about how they set their systems up so that they are not going to damage them and walk them through.

In the long term you might put in a new system that you do not have to touch at all — it is all automatic, but how do you deal with it short term? We are trying to teach the farmers to think of short-term solutions as well as long term and give them strategies for dealing with safety and risk management the same as they would deal with new pasture management or anything else on the farm. So we are trying to get them to think of it as just another part of the management of the farm, rather than as something totally separate. Probably the things that I have found when I have been visiting farms are, firstly, old farmers and old machinery tend to go together and that can be a major issue. People — and not even necessarily the 70-year-olds, but the 50-year-olds who are still trying to do things the way they did when they were 30 years old, only they have slowed down.

Mr McQUILLEN — I have found that out recently — on the golf course, actually.

Ms PYE — That is right — it can happen anywhere. That can be an issue. Certainly, your financials relate to that problem, because a new tractor can solve a lot of problems. If the old tractor is not safe to get on and off, a new tractor may save the hearing and all the rest of it. But that is a mighty expensive thing if the farm is not providing the income for that sort of capital works. It is certainly a hazard.

If we could get farmers to retire at 55 and go to their holiday house — which most of them do not have — you would get rid of most of the deaths because statistically we are still killing our older farmers. If they had a way of being able to retire at 55 or 60, as you would from many jobs, then a large number of our deaths would disappear. If we could get children out of the workplace, fence our farmhouses and also have some sort of babysitting facility in place so that the children did not have to go into the workplace, you would lose the child deaths in the farmhouses.

I think we get a bit carried away with the number of farming deaths that we put down to farming. A child drowning, whether it be in a dam or a pool, is still a child drowning, not a farm-related incident, in the way I consider it. I do not think it matters what they drown in, whether it be a bucket of water or a dam — that is a drowning issue, not a farm death. It is different if they are riding on a motorbike and that tips on the dam because they fell off the four-wheel drive. The reason for it being illegal for them to ride them under 16 is a weight issue. Four-wheel motorbikes, while they have four wheels on the ground, are not stable. They require you to move your weight to have proper control of them, and most children under 16 do not reach the weight ratio to be able to properly control a bike at speed.

As I said, on farms we are facing practical solutions that are there — for instance, it is fencing in the farm and keeping the children in the house. But which is the better decision? Taking the child in the ute while you are doing a job down the farm, or leaving the child in the house on their own? If they are the two solutions, most times you will take the child with you. Farmers are faced with those sorts of decisions every day — that is, asking which is
the lesser of two evils rather than which is the safe option, because often there is not a safe option available. You just have to assess which one is going to be the lesser. That is one of the real difficulties we come to when you have a law or a ruling for the building workplace that says, ‘You will not climb a ladder over 2 metres without scaffolding’, and all the rest of it. With the windmill down the paddock you cannot put scaffolding on it; it is not a strong enough structure to deal with it. You are not necessarily going to have a harness and things available to do it, so sometimes the methods that work in one environment do not work in another. So we grapple all the time on the farm with how to comply with these sorts of rulings.

There are those sorts of issues that we have to work through as well. A lot of the time we are talking about people who work on their own, and it is that isolation that is often the killer rather than the accident itself. There have been many times where someone has been trapped or injured down the paddock where, if they had help almost immediately, they would have survived. But the fact that they have been trapped there for 2 days or extended periods of time has led to them dying rather than the accident itself. In my book isolation is also one of the biggest problems that we are facing.

The CHAIR — On that last point — and I have not heard very much at all about any ideas on it — old people who are living in a home alone can be quite isolated too, especially if there is not a person who regularly checks up on them. They have a back-to-base alarm system around their neck and they press it so that a neighbour knows something has happened. I do not know if that is done through telecommunications or through two-way or CB radios or whatever — but do you think there is a capacity for that on a farm?

Ms PYE — It is certainly an improvement. Mobile phones have improved that tremendously on farms. A large number of farmers now walk around with their mobiles strapped to their hips, which did not happen before. Mobile phones were considered to be the yuppie accessory for a long time. Slowly farmers are finding that they are a useful tool of trade. However, my husband’s is usually on the seat of a ute, on the kitchen bench or somewhere else instead of out with him in the workplace, because he says, ‘I might damage it, so I will leave it there’. So when he is out he does not hear it ring, or it is not there if he has it, but we are getting there. Again you are dealing with people who have done it this way forever. Telling a farmer to wear a bracelet that they can ring home with when they are heading off down the paddock is a long stretch of education; however, if you start with the children, we have all learnt to wear seatbelts.

The CHAIR — Many of us have heard about farm deaths, and the ones that turn most of our stomachs are the ones where the farmer has been laying there for several hours crushed under a piece of moving machinery and has not been able to do anything about it. I have spoken to people who have survived that type of thing. One of them tipped over a grader. I said, ‘How did you do that?’ and he told me how it actually happened to him. He was lucky in the end, but not with his injuries now. I am wondering what you thought about that. Was it practical?

Ms PYE — A communication system is. Often the one to the home might be fine, but we are getting to the stage in rural communities now — —

A few years ago there was always someone locally who you could call. You knew your neighbour was there, or the neighbour’s wife was inside even if yours was not. You had that community fall back. It is the same with children; you used to have your mother down the road, or an auntie or neighbour, whereas now a large number of the other people living on farms are working off the farm, or the actual population in the community has dropped away significantly so that those backups are not there, and even if you could ring home there is no-one at home. So rural communities have changed a lot, and that backup and the close community network that we had on farms a lot of times is disappearing. Even on dairy farms you may have had 300 acres and 150 cows, and the next person down the road was the same and there were communities there. Now you have one farming family running 1000 acres and 500 cows, so it is that bit further away to the next farm, and then it will only be one person on that farm too because the other one is off working. So we have had a major change there so that the backup services are not as close and readily available as they have been.

We are certainly seeing a change in the farming community that I am dealing with in its attitudes to safety. You do see some farmers riding motorbikes with their helmets on. They are becoming more aware of it. So we do have some changes happening, but it is a very slow process.

The CHAIR — Just before Neville spoke about visitors to farms. Obviously a lot of injuries occur because of the lack of practical knowledge. In your training in farm safety programs do you talk about quick
training programs for people when they come to visit, for example, a dairy farm, so that they know when they come to stay away from this or that, or that they do not take the ATV above a certain speed? Do you do that?

Ms PYE — A lot of change is occurring there too. As a kid, when I went to visit my relations’ farms you tagged along and did everything. I remember that my role during harvest was to sit on the front of the truck when they were picking up the hay, and if there was a bale of hay out of whack you jumped off the front of the tractor, rolled it into line and climbed back on again, and all the while the truck was driving along. Today on a farm you would not see that happen. It just would not occur to anyone to allow someone to sit on the front of the truck and jump off and on the front of it, or at least I do not think it happens.

People are becoming more aware. You do not get in and out of moving vehicles if you can possibly help it. That sort of psyche is coming in. Visitors on my farm just do not do what we would have done as kids years ago. If my son has a friend home to play, they play in the designated house area, they do not go and play in the machinery. If we have visitors come to our dairy while we are milking, they either come and stand at one end of the pit, which is not in reach of anything, and they are escorted through the cows, or they stay outside, so we do not encourage visitors into what we consider to be the workplace. With friends from Melbourne coming up, what they do on our farm now is extremely limited compared to what may have happened before. That might be on my farm — it might not be happening everywhere — but it is starting to happen. You are seeing people —

Again a lot of that is litigation driven. People are too frightened that if something goes wrong they will lose the farm. It is a terrible stick to think that is what it has taken to have people do it, but by the same token it means that my nieces and nephews are not getting the experience of farm life that I was able to have. They are not off down the paddock doing jobs. They cannot go and hop in the tractor and go for a ride on it because we just do not let them. There is a real loss in certain areas of it as well, but attitudes are changing, and I think it is a matter of experience, whether it be the visitor or the first-time worker on your farm, or someone new to your farm. Someone might come in and say, ‘Oh, yes, I can drive an ATV, I can ride a bike!’, but you need to know if they know how to ride it in your terrain. Do they know how to ride your vehicle? Do they know the different conditions? Someone who can ride it on a bright sunny day when it is nice and warm is quite different to the person who can handle it in slippery and wet weather chasing cattle across an open paddock. There is more to assessing someone’s ability to do something than just the fact that they have done it before.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.