CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Modewarre – 9 March 2004

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Witness

Mr R. Baker, Farmer.
Mr BAKER — My name is Dick Baker. I live at 820 Horseshoe Bend Road, Mount Duneed. I have been farming all of my life, which has been quite a long one, apart from four years as an engineer in the air force.

If people think farm machinery is dangerous, try messing around with aeroplanes. Farm machinery is dangerous, but not as dangerous as it used to be. The early farm machinery was horrible stuff compared with modern farm machinery. All the engines had the horizontal shaft sticking out, and every pump and everything driven by these things had a horizontal shaft rotating at each end with no guard, and no attempt was made to have a guard. Everything was driven by chains on the all the old machines like chaffcutters and threshers; had a myriad of belts and chain, and everything was horrible. You just had to be very careful, and that is what is lacking now. It is just commonsense. You cannot make things foolproof or accident proof. It is good to have guards on, but draconian legislation is not going to do it. You cannot prevent people from working; they still have to run their farms. If we have too much legislation we will not be running our farms at all. It comes down to education, and that probably should start in schools. The more education and information we can put out to farmers, the better. But it all boils down to commonsense.

If you have some knowledge of basic physics, potential accidents are pretty obvious before they happen. I have only been involved in two accidents in my whole life in farming. They were not serious, but they were preventible — apart from one, with a horse. Horses we do not use much now, but they are much more dangerous than machinery. Animals are unpredictable. We hear a lot about machinery accidents, but we do not hear anything about cattle. I do not think there is any person who could tell me how you can handle a couple of bad-tempered bulls safely in a small yard. You cannot. You just have to use your nut. If you do not use your nut, you die. It is up to the individual all the time, and it always will be. I am afraid that all the legislation in the world will not guard against them; it is a step in the right direction, but it still will not prevent accidents, because they are inherently the responsibility of the person involved. It comes down to the individual, I think.

Regarding ATVs, I have had a lot of experience with various motorbikes, including ATVs. They are a very handy little machine, but they should never have been called all-terrain vehicles, because they are not. They are designed for fun, but they are safe for only reasonably level and smooth ground. They are very useful things and I do not think you should mess around modifying them because they just would not be any use then. If you had rollover protection or outrigger guards, they would be so big and awkward that they would not be any use. You just have to use them sensibly. I have never had any problem with them at all, provided you do not drive them too fast. Mine will not go more than about 35 kilometres an hour and that is more than fast enough. About 30 kilometres an hour is about the outside speed that I ever use. They are very handy little things for a person like me who cannot ride a horse any more because I have two artificial hips and I am confined to a four-wheel bike. They are good, but they are pretty useless if you have to stop because you take half an acre to turn around. They are better than walking, but they cannot even be compared with a horse or even a two wheeler when you have to stop or turn suddenly.

I think it all comes down to the individual. Bringing in legislation requiring guards and things like that is fine, but it still will not stop the carnage unless people are educated. I do not know what the answer is to their education. If people have an accident they tend to look around and say, ‘Who can I blame? It’s not my fault. It must have been the machinery’, or ‘It must have been the employer’, or ‘It must have been somebody else’. The employer is responsible for his safety and the safety of his people, but you cannot hang everything on that. It has to be the individual, I think. You cannot think, ‘Well, if I have an accident I can sue somebody’. It develops what some people call a pot of gold mentality — if you have an accident you say, ‘I’ll sue them, they’ve got lots of money’ and ‘I’ll sue him too’. That is not going to work. You have to look after it yourself. That is about all I would like to say. Thank you very much. It comes back to the individual, I think.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.