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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Mr R. W. Small, Chief Executive Officer, Shire of Colac Otway (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome, Robert. Thank you for giving us your time today. Could you please give us your full name and address?

Mr SMALL — I am Robert Wayne Small, I am the chief executive officer of the Colac Otway shire, and I reside at 12 Troy Street, Colac.

The CHAIR — Are you presenting today in your capacity for Colac Otway shire?

Mr SMALL — Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Could you make a statement or any preliminary comments, and then we will take some time for questions afterwards.

Mr SMALL — Firstly I do not claim to be an expert in local farm safety, but I want to talk a bit about my competence to speak on this subject. I spent 14 years as the operations manager and director of Auckland’s Regional Parks Service in New Zealand, where amongst other activities we managed very significant farming operations involving over 16 000 stock units on over nine separate properties.

Issues of OHS became very familiar to me in that context, and first-hand experience of the resistance in remote areas from staff to actually comply with safety requirements. Colac Otway shire has significant farming as a land use, and council is concerned about the issue of farm safety. The council has actively participated in the Colac farm safety group for more than six years. Tractor and machinery safety for council work staff is also an issue that we are charged with managing.

The key proposition that I want to put forward today is the fact that levels of awareness and the processes involved in developing safe workplaces and practices that are in evidence in most industry and local government today is driven by the relative size and level of culpability that employers and supervisors face in discharging this duty of care for their employees. It could also be said that their level of unionisation is also a factor here. Contrast this with a typical farming operation that is often owner operated and completely devoid of any system of governance or management of control to hold people accountable for safe practices.

While these businesses may employ a few employees they are seldom on the scale that brings this kind of rigour to bear. The acceptance of this splintered nature, if you like, of the farming landscape presents this review with a special challenge. One of the solutions would be to create a virtual organisation to stand in the place of those established structures that are typical and create accountability in large organisations to create a credible body to educate and advocate on behalf of those staff. This vehicle could be an active Victorian Farmers Federation branch charged with the responsibility of overseeing and educating, and training farmers in safe practices. In a sense this is what the Colac farm safety committee has been attempting to do. Among its successes, as mentioned by Graeme before, has been the STAP program, which sought through various funding services that these be constructed. To empower a coordinating body such as a farm safety committee or VFF branch to be effective in my opinion there would need to be two important steps. It is necessary to conduct research to determine the key causes of accidents locally so that they can be targeted through training or other solutions. I understand that the Australian Services Union has worked towards such a research project through seeding funding provided by GHD Management Consulting.

The second thing is to fund these groups directly or channel funds for projects, such as the tractor access grants, through these coordinating groups so that they are empowered to act locally and immediately. In general being able to access safety training close to their business is one of the most practical solutions that could be provided, but for it to be effective it must be convenient. While the Colac Otway shire is not keen to see any cost shifting in this area, being able to add farmers to basic safety training courses could be a practical way of providing training. I am talking about the safety training courses which my council conducts itself.

While practices such as job safety analysis, regular OHS tool box meetings are standard practice in local government and large industry, I doubt that these preventive practices find their way onto our farms today. This is due more to a lack of awareness or a lack of rigour of these practices, I am sure, than a reluctance to work safely. Thank you for the opportunity of addressing you this morning.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.
Mr WALSH — Robert, you spoke about the issue of cost shifting. If local government was going to get involved how would you envisage it being funded to do that?

Mr SMALL — I think you can add to what council does in its training areas. That could be funded, but there are a number of cases where I do not think the cost would be significant. I think better to fund a group that has a direct relationship with farmers than to go to a council is my personal view. Our council has become involved because several of our councillors are farmers and they have a strong interest, but I think the secret to this is empowering the organisations themselves so that they are readily accessible and local. That is why I talk about this issue of a virtual local organisation. Because farming is a really important part of industry within our shire we are clearly involved in the issues and would be prepared help however we can, but we have a number of other imperatives and we have to do the balancing act in terms of funding those as well.

Mr WALSH — If you took it a step further and went to the compliance level, do you see council being involved in the compliance side or just the training?

Mr SMALL — I think the proposition would be really expensive because of the spread of farms and the amount of resources it would take to do that. My own experience in these areas, managing large staff in farming situations, is that you are better to encourage and educate than to enforce. One of the critical issues that any large business will look at are near misses, which need to be reported. As soon as they are reported there is a bit of discussion among the teams that are involved about ‘How do we actually prevent that? That is a dangerous situation’. So there is discussion within small work teams about those things via tool-box meetings. Those methods are always more effective than trying to gain compliance with some inspectorial kind of mode. You are better to educate and encourage. That is why I say that the best chance is creating something that is really accessible but immediate for farmers to access in terms of training opportunities.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You talked about council’s role. To your knowledge are there any other initiatives that you have talked about, whether it is through your peak bodies, the Municipal Association of Victoria or the Victorian Local Governance Association, or do you see yourselves as being the only ones at this stage?

Mr SMALL — I am not aware of any others, but I can certainly assist the process by talking to some of our fellows in the south-west municipalities group to see if anything is there.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — So it is not something that has come up at the MAV, for argument’s sake?

Mr SMALL — I have never heard of it coming up there, no.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Secondly, on the Eric Young seeding grant, can you explain to others in the audience who may not know what that is and can you expand on what progress has been made?

Mr SMALL — It was a program initiated through the Australian Workers Union. They received some funds from GHD Management Consulting and they were hoping to get some similar funding from the state to actually conduct research. I think you need some well-informed data to start targeting the critical areas. I am unaware of where that has got to, but I am sure Yossi Berger of the AWU can give you that information.

Dr NAPTHINE — Rob, you talked about having a body that would help do this. Do you see a role, whether it be through a VFF farm safety group or a group in an area or the region, with people given funds to run training programs and part of that being that as farmers had completed a training program they are rewarded by having a safe access platform installed on a tractor or getting an Aghat to wear on a four-wheel bike, so that they get something concrete in return for doing the training program?

Mr SMALL — I am sure those incentives would assist. I do not know enough about the local farming scene directly to comment on what sorts of rewards would be appropriate, but there is no doubt that at least providing training and accrediting it is an advantage because it then becomes a transportable skill. So if you have farm employees and they are accredited in a particular safety aspect, that becomes wholly transportable.

One of the things that I fear most in our own work crews, but in farm situations too, are chainsaws. I have an absolute horror every time I see somebody drop start a chainsaw. That comes from a long experience in the bush in New Zealand and having seen some pretty horrific accidents as a result of that. Those practices become
commonplace until people really understand what sorts of dangers they face when they do that — and it is all over in a split second.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — One of the dilemmas that we have heard as we go around is that unless you provide some sort of direct, tangible incentives, farmers are reluctant to participate in training programs — unless they can see that there is some direct reward for it.

**Mr SMALL** — That may be so, and that is the reason for my comment that at least it needs to be readily accessible and convenient for them. They are some of the issues, so tying them in with council programs when they are close to workplaces is a good strategy, and one that we would be prepared to assist with.

**Mr INGRAM** — In your submission you state that part of your history is working in parks in New Zealand. You state that for people working on their own and remotely complacency is very strong and that it is easy to throw things off and make excuses. To overcome that, you sat around the tool box and discussed what were the risks and near misses and things like that. One of the challenges for farmers is that obviously most of them are working on their own, but they do not have the same opportunity to often sit around the tool boxes, if you like, and discuss the near misses and work out ways to solve problems. Can you make any recommendations and suggestions on how you can get around that?

**Mr SMALL** — I think the first thing is that if you continue to educate you create a consciousness about those things. If nobody ever says, ‘Gee, that was a near miss’ and a farmer working on his own does not think, ‘Gee, I need to modify that particular behaviour’, or think about why it happened and do some sort of analysis, then you will not get change. You cannot force people to do that kind of analysis; I think it comes with education. It is like the movement in New Zealand to lighter helmets, which created far greater compliance because they are more convenient. When you actually talk through some of the issues of near misses with staff, you can sort of see the lights come on. So I think part of it is creating an awareness of not specific incidents but practices, which are to think about the way you work and some of those things. I am sure that if you do that you will make a difference. You can think of any number of safety issues that have been introduced into the community — whether it is helmets for kids on bicycles, whatever — when the education gradually kicks in and it just becomes common practice and it is no longer a hassle. I’m sure that is one of the secrets.

**Mr WALSH** — Are we targeting the right people in targeting the farmers — and I am one — or should we be targeting the kids in schools or the wives, or whatever? Given that we have always done this that way, and quite often it is our wives and our kids who actually pull us up — I do not want to answer the question for you — should we be targeting the kids in the schools and that sort of thing as well?

**Mr SMALL** — That is certainly part of it, but I think it is also creating an awareness amongst farmers through their peer groups and organisations. They are enormously powerful. They are the groups that are credible to them, not some alternative body that you might want and to set up in any other way. My appeal would be to use the existing systems but to empower them better.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Rob. That was really useful to us. You will receive a copy of the transcript. You can fix it up and that sort of thing, but all the substance has to remain as it is.

**Witness withdrew.**