CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

Members
Mr M. P. Crutchfield  Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman  Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr C. Ingram  Mr P. L. Walsh
Mr J. M. McQuilten

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Staff
Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray
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Witnesses
Ms C. McGowan, member, board of management (sworn); and
Ms S. O’Brien, member (affirmed), Australian Women in Agriculture.
The CHAIR — 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 on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all 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 witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence on the inquiry into the causes of fatalities and injuries on Victorian farms. Welcome everybody.

Cathy and Sharon, would you please for the purposes of the transcript provide your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, your position with the organisation.

Ms O’BRIEN — Sharon O’Brien, PO Box 528, Yarrawonga, Victoria 3730. I am a financial member of Australian Women in Agriculture.

Ms McGOWAN — Cathy McGowan, RMB 2035D, Wodonga, Victoria 3691. I am also a financial member of Australian Women in Agriculture.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Cathy and Sharon, and if you could please provide us with some brief comments and afterwards we will have some questions.

Ms McGOWAN — Thank you for the opportunity to be here, and thank you to the staff for making it possible. As members of Australian Women in Agriculture we appreciate the opportunity to make a few points in this review of deaths and accidents on farms, and specifically we would like to address some issues around women and children — boys and girls — on farms. We understand it is much bigger, but that is the area we are particularly interested in.

In response to terms of reference point 1, the main cause of deaths and injuries on farms and the causes for them, we would like the committee to understand that the workplace is also the family home, and we would like to talk about the issues of children and child care being available to farms. We would also like to talk about the potential causes of accidents on farms arising in circumstances where family members — men, women, boys and girls, and grandparents — are called upon to help or to be that extra labour unit, without them necessarily having the level of skill, strength or experience to do the tasks that are asked of them.

I would also particularly like to encourage that this committee support and build on some of the models that we already have operating in Victoria that work really well. We have some education and training programs, we have some information programs, and we have some innovative child-care programs that are currently working well. I would like to talk to you about some of those that we think could be supported and further developed. We would also like to raise an assumption with the committee: in the advertising campaigns that WorkCare and WorkCover uses to talk about accidents on farms, there seems to be an assumption that the main person who will suffer injury is a man — is the farmer, and we would really encourage this committee to look at the financial, economic and social costs of accidents to women and to their children. We would like to talk a little bit about that, and further we would also encourage that in any programs or recommendations that are developed by this committee you would consult with organisations such as Australian Women in Agriculture and the Country Women’s Association and preschool and school councils so that the targeted programs can then be evaluated and we can make sure that the intended consequences are evaluated against the actual consequences. We have a feeling that often intentions are really good but the outcomes miss the mark and we do not then go back and evaluate and check and rejig the programs.

I would like to finish with one specific example of that — the regulation introduced by the Victorian government about the licensing of aunts, specifically as it impacts on me — that I have to get a licence to work with my nieces and nephews on my farm, and there have been enormous negative consequences to that particular bit of regulation. I think if we had appropriate evaluation checks and balances in place we would actually come up with regulations that might have the desired result rather than missing the mark and creating angst. That is a general overview of the points that I would be happy to discuss in more detail. Would you like to talk some of the things that interest you, Sharon, or will we wait for the questions?

Ms O’BRIEN — No, we will wait for the questions.

The CHAIR — Which particular programs do you think really deserve support and strengthening?
Ms McGOWAN — In north-east Victoria and in southern New South Wales, we have an innovative model of delivery of children’s services. It is called FARMS, which stands for farms and rural mobile services. It is a program that is jointly funded by the commonwealth and state governments whereby we deliver children’s services on farms and in rural communities. It currently operates in the shires of Towong, Alpine and Indigo. It has been going for eight years, and in the shires where that works we have had no accidents or deaths of children on farms in that period of time. The model is under review and reconstruction by the commonwealth government under what it calls broadbanding, and the committee is very fearful that the model will no longer be funded because it does not fit within the guidelines of the commonwealth and in particular the Victorian government’s advocate for child-care services. That is one.

We also have a fantastic education program called Farmsafe for Kids, which has a kit, and we work with preschool children in our preschool and child-care centres on farm safety activities. We teach them about risk management, development strategies, negotiating with parents in the context of fun and games with kids. That particular program has been funded in partnership with the philanthropy trust and has been very successful. I have details and would be happy to put you in touch with the people who run this program so you can get more detail. It is very small. It is not well funded but is very successful.

Mr INGRAM — You mentioned that governments should consult with the CWA and yourselves and other organisations. What is the relationship like in delivering programs? We have been told fairly regularly that programs are better if they are delivered through local organisations such as Landcare that have the networks in the local community, and that provides a better opportunity to reach the target audience. Do you see the models delivered through separate organisations as better, or do you think that there is a possibility that organisations can unite and form a group to deliver them? What is your relationship like with the VFF and other organisations to do things like that?

Ms McGOWAN — The relationship with the VFF is very strong. I am a member of the Victorian Farmers Federation, as are many members of Australian Women in Agriculture, but it is very difficult to work with it to deliver services because Australian Women in Agriculture acts as a voluntary organisation and does not have paid staff.

Mr INGRAM — You see your role as more advisory? When programs are being discussed and delivered are you given the opportunity to comment on them?

Ms McGOWAN — Very much so. I think members would be very reluctant for voluntary organisations to take on more delivery of services.

Ms O’BRIEN — Having said that, I must say that the Victorian Farmers Federation’s Farmsafe project was an excellent example of someone working on the ground at grassroots level. It consulted widely but in a local capacity.

Ms McGOWAN — It did!

Ms O’BRIEN — It used the CFA, local football and netball clubs and Australian Women in Agriculture et cetera, so I see you point: there is a role for NGOs to play. The Victorian Farmers Federation Farmsafe project is still going. That is an excellent example of something working well on the ground and not duplicating other services from other providers.

Mr INGRAM — The committee has also heard that a lot of the programs that target not only young people like the program you described but also partners of male farmers can be an easier way of getting the message through because sometimes the take-up is not very good in some of the male farmers. Have you got a comment about targeting through both children and partners or other women in agriculture?

Ms McGOWAN — Yes. One of the things we have come to understand is that generic targeting does not work. If you want to change behaviour you need programs targeted to men, and in my experience it works much better to have men working with men. They understand it, and we have had some fantastic occupational health and safety programs done for men through footy clubs and Lions clubs. You get a good speaker up and you do it around health. It is not very successful to encourage women to do that for men because men do not like it and women do not like it, and it does not work the other way. If you want to change women’s behaviour it is not a very effective thing to get the blokes to start nagging women about their behaviour. Our comment would be programs
that target men should use men and that programs that target women should use women. Children need a specific
design. It is not that I would discourage other ways of doing it, just that what you are trying to do needs to be very
transparent.

Ms O’BRIEN — I understand what you are saying. Women on farms are the collators and the
disseminators of information. I can talk from personal experience that they are generally the occupational health
and safety officers; that is generally the role that they wear. The difficulty is in translating that information to
somebody who is very busy and who generally speaks a different language to you. It is all about the demographics
target. I tend to think about having the message go out to whole-farm families rather than to a specific group. I take
your point, however. You are right: they generally tend to take the information on board more readily and listen.

The CHAIR — You also talked in your opening remarks about family members on farms being called on
to do tasks that are not appropriate to their ability or to their strengths. Would you mind expanding on that and
perhaps giving us some solutions or recommendations so we can try to avoid that happening?

Ms O’BRIEN — Specifically with children, when children are injured it has very little to do with
education and training of farm machinery and equipment. It is generally due to lack of supervision, so that is a
simple child-care, child supervision model. Forty-three per cent of the deaths of farm children in 2001-02 occurred
in dams, so that is a direct lack of supervision in farm water. With women it tends to be much more in relation to
education and training. There are more women moving into the agricultural work force so those issues tends to be
much more with education and training than supervision, et cetera.

Ms McGOWAN — Perhaps you could give an example like, ‘Darling, will you come and help me?’.

Ms O’BRIEN — They are called the ‘justa jobs’. Women are not represented directly in the fatalities as
much. In fact the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation does not have any data on women
farmers’ deaths and injuries because there are not any available but generally — I am speaking from a Western
Australian study done in 1991, which is the only information I could find, so it is 13 years ago — women across the
female work force are disproportionately injured and killed in farms and agricultural accidents, and they are the
justa jobs — ‘just come and hold this’, or ‘just come and help out in the dairy’, so they are generally injured or
killed when performing and working in areas they are not familiar with.

Ms McGOWAN — One of the things I would like to propose to this committee: we have this fantastic
education and training program for farming people funded by FarmBis, a commonwealth-state program. It has been
operating very successfully as a training program and a skills-based program for farming people and it runs very
well. However, it is in review at the moment and we are looking to the commonwealth budget to refund it and
renegotiate with the states on running it again with the states for another three years after May.

Traditionally the mindset with the FarmBis program was that we needed to train farmers in management skills.
Therefore we — Australian Women in Agriculture — would run training programs. Because many of our women
come to farming by marriage — they have had another life — we would like to skill them up. We would like to run
skills-based training programs for women on farms to provide training for things like using augers, safety in cattle
handling, the skills-based stuff that you need. Unfortunately FarmBis said it would not fund that, it would only fund
management stuff. It is a real gap in the market. We have the courses, we can run the training for women, but we
have no funding. It applies also to men — newcomers to farming or hobby farmers — who need to come and learn
how to operate well. There is no system of education to teach you how to safely do the things you need to do. My
recommendation would be that you look closely at the new FarmBis program to make sure that subsidies and
positive incentives are offered to enable farming families to do basic skills safety programs under that FarmBis
program.

Ms O’BRIEN — Particularly with the prevalence of what I call the multidimensional farm, which is
hobby farmers, people moving into rural and residential areas who might run a few head of cattle, or they might be
playing with horses. The urban-rural divide is becoming increasingly mixed. The number of horse-related injuries
occurring to adolescent and older females and females in general is also disproportionately high. So that is just
practical skills-based training that simply does not exist at the moment.

Ms McGOWAN — Last year we did a report for the Victorian FarmBis looking at women’s access to and
their take up of FarmBis, but it works with men as well. One of the big problems with the old program was that
they would fund level certificate 4 and above, so they would not fund the lower level. They had a very poor relationship with the local community-based adult education programs. It did not link very well with FarmBis. We are very keen to get our local education providers to run farm safe courses. That would have worked well because we had paid coordinators, they had the networks, they could do the education and training and do the certificate process that you needed as well. But the two were quite separate and there was a very poor relationship between FarmBis, and consequently it was hard to get the adult education people to run these courses for us.

Ms O’BRIEN — I want to add a couple of comments. My other hat that I wear, apart from that of being a farm woman and a member of Australian Women in Agriculture, is that of a part-time journalist in this region. I cover issues for the Fairfax press, which runs the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age. I have been doing that for the last 14 or 15 years. In relation to your issue about the meaningful and focused targeting of resources, overwhelmingly and anecdotally my experience of 15 years in north-east Victoria is that farm-based services work. Farmers will not leave the farm and go and see a mental health professional. They will not leave the farm, particularly in these financial circumstances, and go to a farm safety field day. Mobile services anonymous, which this chap was referring to — for example, the Big Red Bus which local government funded for youth mental health services et cetera, goes around to farms. It is based on rural and youth issues. It was a failure when it first came out because it carried around mental health material and it was labelled as something that pulled into town for people who had problems. It was not until the Big Red Bus took on board issues such as unemployment benefits, taxation, local library modelling and so on that people felt that they could roll into town and hop on it and have a degree of anonymity.

Dr Egan-Vine was talking before about farming people in particular and their horrific statistics, that they will not go off farm and seek mental health assistance. There are not adequate mental health facilities in north-east Victoria. Even if people wanted to leave the farm and find them there are no psychiatrists or psychiatric nurses around here for people to access. If you were going to target anything towards farm health in its broader context, I would overwhelmingly endorse something that was mobile, that worked and that was anonymous and non-threatening.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time and submission today. You will receive a copy of the transcript. You may correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.