CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Shepparton – 14 April 2004

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Witness
Ms R. L. Launder, regional occupational health and safety coordinator, Department of Primary Industries (affirmed).
The CHAIR — For the purposes of the transcript, would you provide us with your full name and address, the name of your organisation and your position within that organisation?

Ms LAUNDER — My name is Robyn Lynette Launder. I live at 58 Charles Street, Mooroopna. I work as an OHS coordinator for the Department of Primary Industries based at Tatura.

In terms of the context of my being here this evening I am basically attending to respond to questions pertaining specifically to the research farm at the Department of Primary Industries, Tatura. I will start with some background about DPI Tatura. It was first established as a horticultural research station in 1937. The Tatura site is now world renowned for developing the Tatura trellis, a method of growing fruit tree crops to achieve high early yields.

Today DPI Tatura focuses on research, development and extension activities in areas relating to sustainable natural resource management in irrigated agriculture. Over 180 staff are located at the site, working in a range of research and extension activities that support the horticultural and dairy industries and the broader farming community. The farm area at Tatura consists of 96 hectares with approximately 50 per cent taken up by experimental research projects each year. Current projects relate to annual and perennial horticulture in the areas of tomato, pear and peach breeding, orchard irrigation and fertiliser management, and to irrigated pasture and crop management in areas such as soil and water salinity, nutrient and irrigation management and irrigation application technology.

In terms of OHS and DPI Tatura’s farm, DPI Tatura has actively worked to improve health and safety on its research farm over the last five years, introducing a number of policy, training and cultural change initiatives to minimise the risk of fatality or injury. Broadly, OHS is managed by a range of processes which include hazard identification, risk assessment, risk control strategies, staff involvement and consultation by designated work group representatives and OHS committees, supported by OHS coordinators like myself and, where required, external consultants, audits and inspections, and the provision of information and training by policies, procedures, induction and competency accreditation programs.

Specific risk areas identified and addressed on DPI Tatura’s farm have included farm plant and equipment. As part of a plant risk assessment program a broad range of plant and equipment no longer required for farm operations or for project work has been eliminated. Access restrictions have been implemented to manage remaining items ensuring that only trained and competent users can access plant and equipment and that items are used in accordance with standard operating procedures. Purchase of new items of plant and equipment requires health and safety issues to be formally addressed via a risk assessment. There are two high risk areas, I guess, that have been addressed. Firstly, all tractors are fitted with rollover protection structures, are maintained in accordance with the manufacturer’s recommendations and moving parts of both tractors and attachments are appropriately guarded to prevent entanglement. Operators must also hold a current certificate of competency. The other area is all-terrain vehicles, or ATVs, and DPI Tatura has eliminated all but one ATV, substituting these with speed governed Gators, which is the terminology, which provide for increased stability via a lower wheel base.

Additional areas that have been addressed in chemicals are that all staff required to use agricultural chemicals are trained in their use and required to compete an agricultural chemical users course. Material safety data sheets are provided for all farm chemicals, and risk assessments have been completed to ensure compliance with both dangerous goods and hazardous substances regulations. A pre-purchase system has been established to ensure that intended purchase of new or additional chemicals is reviewed for necessity, possible substitutes and storage and handling requirements. The agricultural chemical shed is regularly audited to ensure compliance with both storage requirements and inventory management processes.

Another risk area identified with a farm has been manual handling, and hazardous manual tasks have been identified and risk assessment and control strategies are being developed and implemented. Manual handling training and information has been provided to staff. Finally, sun exposure is the last risk area that I have outlined here. Employees are provided with broad-brimmed hats, sunglasses and 30 plus SPF sunscreen. In addition, Sunsmart sessions are provided and the Sunsmart policy promoted. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening, and if there are any questions, I am happy to answer them.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Robyn.

Mr WALSH — As to the falling from heights regulations, what strategies do you have in place to deal with that?
Ms LAUNDER — I am talking here specifically about DPI Tatura. On working at heights, we have developed a draft policy and a program to train, particularly facility managers, to undertake risk assessment and hazard identification risk assessment and to then determine appropriate control strategies. Plans are being formulated in terms of implementation. Currently that is as far as that has gone.

Mr WALSH — So if people are more than 2 metres off the ground to deal with fruit trees, how do you envisage that is going to work?

Ms LAUNDER — Fortunately the bulk of the trees at the DPI Tatura site would be under 2 metres. For those trees that are above 2 metres, it will be an interesting challenge. We do have the use of cherry pickers to go through and harvest and prune at those sort of heights, but there are additional requirements that will need to be looked at in terms of appropriateness in relation to those new regulations.

Mr WALSH — Why I ask is because you will set the example for the rest of the orchard industry, probably. So is a cherry picker exempt from the fall-from-heights regulations?

Ms LAUNDER — I am not certain of the details of how that relates to falls from heights, but I know it will be an area that will still need to be looked at in terms of those new regulations.

Dr NAPTHINE — Robyn, over the last five years what has been the accident record at DPI Tatura?

Ms LAUNDER — I think there were some statistics that were supplied in relation to the first submission from DPI generally. Tatura, according to the insurer, has had one manual handling related injury over the last five years. Whether that related to the farm is questionable. We would not deem it to be because it was an incident that happened in a glasshouse-cum-laboratory facility, which we would not deem to be part of our traditional farm area, but in recent times on the data that was provided, that is the one incident.

Dr NAPTHINE — What about scratches, nicks, cuts? Do you have a record of those?

Ms LAUNDER — We do maintain an incident register of those. I could provide that data if the committee would like.

Dr NAPTHINE — That would be appreciated.

Ms LAUNDER — How far back would you like?

Dr NAPTHINE — Five years. How is pruning done? What is the normal procedure for pruning?

Ms LAUNDER — Pruning is largely nowadays done via external contractors who are skilled in the use of mechanical pruning tools. They come in over an X-week period and prune the fruit trees.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do they climb ladders?

Ms LAUNDER — No, it is largely using cherry pickers to drive through the orchard and adjust the height, depending on the tree.

Dr NAPTHINE — Using mechanical — —

Ms LAUNDER — Using mechanical pruners, pneumatic ones.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you monitor their safety performance?

Ms LAUNDER — Yes. At the end of the day we are responsible for their health and safety, irrespective of them being contractors.

Mr INGRAM — In your presentation you indicated that you have eliminated all but one ATV and replaced those vehicles with speed-governed Gators. We have had a lot of evidence from all sorts of farmers who say that the ATV is one of most useful pieces of equipment they have. What is the comparison in cost? Do you have a rough indication of that?
Ms LAUNDER — I have no data on cost. For our purposes at DPI Tatura, given the activities we undertake, a Gator is a much more suitable vehicle for us to use. It reduces those hazards and the types of activities. Largely it is driving out to an orchard block, it is driving out to a research plot and carrying some gear in the back. It is far more suitable than a traditional ATV. I do not have any information on costs.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you use those vehicles for spraying operations?

Ms LAUNDER — We use Gators for herbicide spraying. We have a tank mounted on the back of one of the Gators.

Mr INGRAM — And the Gator is designed for that?

Ms LAUNDER — The Gator is designed for that, and there is a spray in it that is compatible with that.

Dr NAPTHINE — What about orchard spraying? How do you do that?

Ms LAUNDER — Orchard spraying is done via tractor and a spray unit.

Dr NAPTHINE — Yours or a contractor’s?

Ms LAUNDER — Ours.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What were some of the issues about the ATVs, though? Under the hierarchy of control the last one is elimination — —

Ms LAUNDER — Under the hierarchy of control, elimination is the first one, so wherever possible we went to elimination.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You did not explore any of the others? Why did you just remove it? What were the reasons? Did you have any incidents? Was it anecdotal? You had ATVs and you got rid of them?

Ms LAUNDER — That is correct.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Why?

Ms LAUNDER — We had some anecdotal incidents, not just locally but I guess throughout what was then the Department of Agriculture about those sorts of incidents, the broader data available from WorkCover about the risks, and I guess looking at the types of activities that we undertook, elimination was the best way. That was the first on the hierarchy of control, and it suited our purposes.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — But you did not have any accidents or incidents?

Ms LAUNDER — At DPI Tatura we had not any accidents for several years, no.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time tonight, Robyn. You will get a copy of the transcript in the next couple of weeks and you may correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.