RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Kerang – 23 March 2004

Members

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Witnesses

Cr K. den Houting, Member (sworn);
Cr L. Basile, Mayor (sworn), Gannawarra Shire Council.
The CHAIR — I welcome Cr Keith den Houting and Cr Luigi Basile from the Gannawarra Shire Council. Gentlemen, I invite you to provide your full names and addresses and indicate whether you are attending as individuals or as representatives of the council.

Cr den HOUTING — I am representing the Gannawarra Shire Council. I have with me the mayor, Cr Basile, for moral support. My full name is Keith den Houting, and my address is 9485 Murray Valley Highway, Kerang.

Cr BASILE — My full name is Luigi — commonly known as Lui — Charles Basile, and my residential address is 12 Vaughan Street, Kerang.

The CHAIR — Will you be talking as mayor of the Gannawarra Shire Council?

Cr BASILE — I am just here supporting my representative here, Cr den Houting. He has been briefed to talk on behalf of the council.

The CHAIR — I invite you to make some introductory comments and then members will ask questions.

Cr den HOUTING — I believe the committee has received a copy of what our chief executive officer sent in. It is basically an opportunity for us to come before the committee, and we thank it for that opportunity.

The council sought input from the Cohuna-Leitchville and Kerang-Koondrook branches of United Dairyfarmers of Victoria and the Kerang and Eastern Mallee branches of the Victorian Farmers Federation. Further, the council conducted a briefing session relating to on-farm safety on 29 October 2003. The following is a summary of the information collected by the council.

Local farmer groups believe that education rather than regulation is the key to improving farm safety. The local Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE campus provides farm safety courses. These courses could be further enhanced and promoted to the farming community. The Kerang campus of the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE and Workcover are also currently involved in a program of farm workplace safety audits, including tractors, machinery, silos, shearing sheds, chemical storage and dairies.

No farm accident is a deliberate accident. Farmers are ageing, and there is no incentive for family members to take over the running of the family farm. Local groups believe the average age of dairy farmers in the shire is 57, and the average age of dryland farmers is 55. Income of other occupations lures young people away from farms, and the income return margin is so low that a farm can no longer support more than one family. The ‘old’ farmer rarely has any off-farm investments or the capital to purchase a home off farm, so he stays on and continues to run the family farm, working very long hours.

The age factor affects reflexes and makes accidents more likely to occur, particularly when dealing with machinery. The older farmer is also not to think as quickly as a young person. I have a problem accepting that, but anyway, I am an old farmer! They have also done things the same way for so many years that change is not easily accepted. I also do not agree with that! The reduced income means there is often no assistance available to perform tasks that may be better performed by two people, and that often places farmers at risk.

Farmers generally cannot afford changes necessary under mandatory laws regarding machinery, buildings, shearing sheds et cetera. Thousands of dollars cannot be found to meet these regulations. Agriculture is governed by world price, dollar value et cetera. Income is out of the hands of farmers and stifles the chance of having a guaranteed income.

Money is therefore difficult to set aside to make improvements required by occupational health and safety regulations.

During transitional stages of introduction of new technology and standards, government subsidies, like the rollover bar subsidy, need to be available for farmers to meet improvements. A realistic approach must be taken and allow farmers to meet standards within a reasonable time.
Achievable time lines to meet risk assessment and quality assurance standards should be set rather than pressuring for immediate compliance, as is often the case. This would assist the farmer greatly. Priority improvements could be listed and Workcover or other controlling and monitoring bodies notified when a standard has been met.

It would be beneficial if incentives for early compliance were made available, as all groups consulted indicated this would lead to early adoption.

Local farmer groups also felt that farming is no more dangerous than other occupations, even though statistics show differently. Most farmers do their best to be safe, but at times accidents do occur. Doing a job slightly differently just once when dealing with machinery can have dire consequences. The issue of children on farms has been raised in recent times to such an extent that farmers were told that children were no longer to work on the farm. How will they learn the safe way to do things if their parents and grandparents cannot coach them from an early age? If children grow up doing things in a safe way, safe practices are more likely to stay with them throughout life and therefore limit farm accidents in the future.

We have attached a couple of documents. One is Farm Safety ... What Are You Doing About It? You will see some local photos in it. Here is a picture of Dr Keogh, whom you have just spoken to, and here is one of the mayor. This picture is of Max and Judy Simmonds with Macaire, their son. They were involved in an accident. Jodie got her hair caught in a PTO shaft in the dairy. There is also a picture of Russell Bott, as well as other local people.

We have no problem with the recognition that statistics support the concept that farming is dangerous. Farmers are not covered under safety awards, and there is no union. We have associations, but it is not compulsory to be a member. Farmers are slower, older and often work alone. On the other hand younger men want to work quickly and get it done, and they say, ‘Quick, we are in a hurry!’. Machinery is bigger and reaction time is less because the machinery is quicker. At the moment finances are very tight — and they are not often anything else.

One of the big things we have to remember is that farmers, like other people, are creatures of habit and do take risks. There are some benefits in our region at the moment. Ballarat University, in association with the TAFE, is running a managing farm safety course, which includes a farm safety audit. The lecturer or teacher will go out and assist a farmer to go over all his programs on the farm, all of his machinery and do a farm audit. The instructor will give that farmer some recognition of where the problems are and problems with farming methods.

We also have a milk company doing safety audits, both for products and for operators — and that is very important. Dairy Food Safety Victoria audits the product we produce, but the companies — Murray Goulburn, for instance, has a farm audit which is checked every two years — go around and check that your belts are covered and that your PTO shafts are covered et cetera. We also have a chemical users course and a refresher course which are run through the Kerang campus of the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE.

Education alone is not sufficient; we have tried that. The previous Labor government tried to introduce education programs, but farmers did not heed them. Unfortunately I have to say that. Legislation on its own does not work either, because it adds big dollars to the costs of farmers. With subsidisation, you can subsidise all you want, but there will be limited benefit. Users will benefit, but they will not heed what you are trying to tell them. Our suggestion is that we have a triple program of education, legislation and subsidisation, where the farmers will receive some benefit and some incentives to do that.

The rollover protection frame on tractors was a magnificent program. It needs to be heeded as a forerunner of anything else.

Mr Costello has asked us to work after 65 years of age. Most farmers are damn well doing that, I can assure you.

I have some other questions. Has any member of the committee ever tried to work while wearing a helmet, goggles, earmuffs and gloves? Have you tried to work with cows, ride a motorbike or do manual jobs on farms? Peter has been a tomato grower, so he will know it is almost impossible to do that. We appreciate the fact that they are for our own benefit, but they are very difficult.

In conclusion, I want to impress on you that I do not have a gripe with farmers; they are innovative, adaptable and enthusiastic. They work for themselves, not for somebody else, and that is the important issue. They want to be good and do not want to take risks, but sometimes that happens. Thank you.
The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Keith.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am surprised that in your submission you make no mention of council’s role or the VFF’s role. I would have thought that both of those are critical partners in any holistic approach. You have mentioned your three themes — that is, education, legislation and subsidisation. Firstly, what role, if any, is there for council in terms of a municipal public health plan? The Colac Otway shire has argued quite strongly that there is a role for council to play. Secondly, what role, if any, should the VFF play in terms of programs and/or resources, and can it do a lot more?

Cr den HOUTING — I will answer the second question first. The VFF representative is standing over there, and I do not want to cross into his territory. The VFF representative will speak to you afterwards.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am after your opinion, not the VFF’s.

Cr den HOUTING — Within the VFF and the UDV are certain aspects that we do a lot of education and promotion of safety issues on, but at the moment, as far as I know, I am not aware of any pressures that Paul or the VFF or UDV are placing on Workcover or work safety issues as far as the legislation issue goes.

On a local council basis we have discussed this. We are a reasonably new council, and basically six out of seven of us were elected this year. We have sat down and discussed them. We are doing some discussions with farmer bodies. We have had those representatives here. We also have a health officer in place who looks after the general community, not just farming people.

Cr BASILE — Cr den Houting mentioned the fact that there is a course being operated by Ballarat uni and TAFE in conjunction. That was raised at the council level, and council moved to support that and to go back to government to seek some funding. Our view in general was that, rather than relying on regulatory proceedings and hitting the farmer after the event, it would be ideal to have a preventive scheme in place. One of the thoughts council had was for council to have the ability to go out and do farm audits in an advisory capacity. The problem with that, as with a lot things, is constraints on finance. Council does not have the financial ability to embark on that sort of thing at this point in time. With assistance from the government, or wherever, we felt that we could embark on a program where we would voluntarily visit farms. We could do a one-to-one inspection, not in a punitive but in an advisory capacity. We feel that if farmers are talked to and advised, then they will listen. If you go with a view of turning a rock over, finding what is wrong and then punishing them for it, then you will get a different reaction from them. Council is certainly in favour of it, but unfortunately, as in most things, the dollar signs have to be looked at.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I still have not got an answer. There is a view that all Victorian shires should have farm safety incorporated in their municipal public health plans. Do you have a view on that at this stage?

Cr BASILE — I am not familiar personally with whether we have one in place. Certainly I believe council is in favour of that sort of thing. I cannot elaborate on that further at this stage.

Cr den HOUTING — We would certainly support an issue like that if it came up for council. As Cr Basile mentioned, the dollars are pretty tight.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You would require very few dollars to incorporate them into a municipal health plan.

Cr BASILE — Program-wise we are talking about, yes. We want to be proactive, but we are limited in what we can do.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Keith and Lui, for your time and for the work you did in researching the local area. You will receive a copy of the transcripts, and you will be able to make corrections on matters of grammar or fact, but not on matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.