CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

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Witness

Mr K. Klemm, farmer.
The CHAIR — We are at that time of the day where we invite people to make comments from the floor. 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. If there is anybody else who has not contributed today and would like to, if you could just get eye contact with me or Kristen, we will acknowledge you. If you are going to make comments, could you please keep them quite brief. There probably will not be any questions afterwards, but your information will be recorded in the transcript and you will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar, the same as other people. You will receive that in a couple of weeks time. Before you begin, could you give us your full name and address.

Mr KLEMm — Keiran Klemm, RMB 5880, Wangaratta 3678. I wish to divide my comments into two parts. As a farmer for 46 years and father of six between 16 and 32 who have all been raised on the farm, the issue I wanted to speak on was categorising accidents that happen on the so-called farm. I will mention some. One four-year-old falling out of a top bunk needed hospitalisation and it is not a farm accident. A child getting bitten by a dog on the face outside the house fence is not technically a farm accident; it could have happened anywhere. A child cutting his foot at the wood heap playing with an axe is technically not a farm accident. One that was was a child jamming his finger in a machine that I was operating. I reported it and was investigated. I draw these to your attention because we have heard some of the previous speakers talking about living in a farm household, living in the factory. I want to see them separated, whether they be in pursuit of an income, a lifestyle, social or leisure. Out in the area where I live quite a lot of blocks have been subdivided. Some people might call them hobby farms. I call them lifestyle blocks. On one, a 9-acre block, when I was coming in today, there was a little grey Fergie with no rollbar. It had a grader blade on the back of it today. They have been landscaping where they put the shed in. Sometimes you can go past and they have a rear-end loader on it carting it full of dirt high up, going over the mound, and we all know where the centre of gravity is going to be. Today, as I say, there was a grader blade. This is my concern. If I call in there and tell them that if they have an accident and the 12-year-old child that is operating it is killed, he is going to be liable, they are not going to think much of me. If I send out WorkSafe, it might get round as to who dobbed them in. So you are caught in between. So much for that part.

The second part I speak on today — and I have met most of you in other theatres — is that as a councillor in the Rural City of Wangaratta, I have been chairing the drought subcommittee. We have heard some of the speakers talk about suicides. I have come across these fairly closely. One was from a lady ringing me and saying, ‘Pete has just hung himself’, that is getting very close. That was on a farm a couple of years ago, and the last one was six months ago where I was asked to deliver the eulogy at a funeral where one of our neighbours had suicided. So I am quite aware of it. As far as our drought subcommittee goes, we have watched fairly closely the stress that people have been under with the drought, and while in the second half of last year possibly we thought we were out of drought, the drought certainty has not left us. We have had the driest three and a half months this year so far. Most areas are like that. In my position as a councillor and chair of that committee, we are still very concerned.

Sometimes you see farmers who can be very proud. Some of them are too proud to go and ask for help. We saw examples last year of people who would not attend their local information session run by Centrelink — and it was a very good program they put together. They were driving from the far side of Wangaratta down to Euroa or Seymour to attend where nobody would know them, to try and seek out help. At least they were doing something. But sometimes I think where people possibly feel a failure, rather than just go and commit suicide as one did throwing the rope over a tree or out the back of the shed or using the gas in the car, some of these other accidents may have been carelessness in the way of suicide where people will at least get some assistance. Rather than go out as a complete failure, if there is some assistance coming in the way of the family, he possibly goes out not feeling as bad as he could have. It is pretty hard to prove whether it is suicide. I suppose some of the more learned people who investigate might establish why some of these occurred, but there are certainly a lot of accidents in my view that point back to suicide, so that certainly is a concern. But the main thing was that any accidents in rural areas, if they are not on a road, if they are in a paddock or something, they are called an accident on the farm. If kids are riding trail bikes in a quarry at a weekend and have an accident, is it an industrial accident or isn’t it? So we have certainly got to separate the leisure, social, working accidents that happen on farms. That is my greatest concern. It gives us not only a bad name as an industry; it sort of adds to your premiums on WorkCover and other insurance issues, so it is certainly something that has to be addressed. Thank you.
Witness withdrew.