RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Lakes Entrance–6 April 2004

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

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff
Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witnesses
Ms A. D. Hallett, committee member (sworn); and
Ms K. Easton, vice president (affirmed), Meerlieu and District Rural Community Group.
The CHAIR — Welcome, Anita and Kerry. For the purposes of the transcript would you give us your full name and address and if you are representing an organisation today the name of that organisation and your role or position within it.

Ms EASTON — I am Kerry Easton. I live at 205 Turners Road, Bengworden. I am vice-president of the Meerlieu and District Rural Community Group.

Ms HALLETT — My name is Anita Dorothy Hallett. I live at 265 Clebyarra Road, Goon Nure. I am a committee member of the same group.

The CHAIR — If you present us with some brief comments then we will have some questions afterwards. We have a copy of a submission from you, so we are pretty right with that.

Ms EASTON — I have lived in Meerlieu for the past three years. I came here from Melbourne. My previous work background was in the fashion industry, theatre and adult education. We moved from Melbourne as a direct consequence of a workplace accident, so over the past five years I have become far too familiar with the devastation an injury can impact on a household and extended family. In order for my partner to have any quality of life — more than confinement to a recliner chair and sitting in front of pay-TV — we decided to relocate. It was incredibly difficult, prior to moving, for me to juggle work, household maintenance, health care for my partner, children’s study et cetera. As a consequence of the relocation I am able to earn a small income that does not rely on me trundling out to work every day for an hourly rate of pay.

The point I am trying to make with that is that injuries impact on more than just the people who are injured; they impact in ways that you cannot plan for and the social consequences are enormous, and all those things have to be taken into account in any farm safety promotions or educational programs that are occurring. You simply cannot plan for it.

Ms HALLETT — As I said, my name is Anita Hallett. My husband and I are full-time farmers in the Goon Nure area. I have been living in the area for 20 years; my husband has been there all his life. My previous experience includes several years with the Department of Agriculture and five years with the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture (McMillan), which was based in Bairnsdale. My job there was to run courses for farmers.

Today Kerry and I are representing the Meerlieu and District Rural Community Group. This is a voluntary organisation with members from the local community. The Meerlieu district is located south of the Princes Highway between Bairnsdale and Stratford. The area is a farming community with mainly wool, fat lambs, cattle and cropping. There are about 250 households in an area of approximately 1000 square kilometres. With no town or general store the population is dispersed. However, the community is a rich one centred around a primary school, a cricket club and various community groups. Last year our community group, together with Jill Tucker, organised a social function with the objective of raising awareness of occupational health and safety on farms, particularly the importance of safe work practices. Issues raised that night, together with further discussions in the local community, have led to the formation of this paper.

Today we want to look at specific issues that we would like to highlight rather than go through the whole paper. One of our first things is the validity of farm statistics. Farms are work sites, homes and recreational venues. Farm statistics are skewed by domestic and recreational activities being recorded as workplace accidents. This leads to a false representation of fatalities and injuries on farms, and therefore often has no credibility with farmers. For example, an accident cutting wood for domestic purposes on a farm is recorded as a workplace accident. This is not the case if a plumber has an accident cutting wood for his own domestic use.

Kids hurt while racing motorbikes on a farm can be recorded as farm accidents, whereas it is actually a recreational activity. I have also had it raised with me, although I have not been able to chase up whether it is true or not, that horse accidents, because they go under a rural area, are recorded under farm accidents. Even if they happen at the local pony club, say in Bairnsdale, they are recorded under farm statistics. The person I need to check that with is away at the moment.

It also appears that farming is the only occupation where hobby accidents are also recorded as workplace accidents. For example, if a dentist does woodwork as a hobby and has an accident, this does not go into carpentry workplace
accidents. However, if the dentist has a 50-hectare hobby farm and he rolls over his ATV, this goes into farm workplace accidents. Why are they treated differently?

One of the other key areas we looked at was older farmers and young people. Farmers over 55 and young people account for about two-thirds of farm deaths. I believe cases involving teenagers are very similar to road accidents. The problems arise because young people often lack experience, they believe they are invincible and they are largely motivated by their peers and the media. For older people, hearing, sight, reflexes and balance are all affected by age. Despite this many farmers keep trying to do what they did 30 to 40 years earlier. All too often this is due to necessity because there is no-one else to help them on the farm. There is often a lack of knowledge of other ways to do things. Older people need to be aware of their changing capabilities and learn how to work smarter. We believe that specific programs need to be targeted at those groups, and we have given some examples.

On farm machinery, when modifications have to be made to machinery — for example, the fitting of rollover protection to tractors — the machinery has to be removed from the farm. This is expensive, time consuming and can be dangerous. We believe it to be far more effective for farmers to have the option to do the modifications on site. This would allow several options: (one) to transport equipment to a tradesperson, as is currently done; (two) the tradesperson attends the work site; or (three) the farmer is able to do the modifications himself or herself. Many farmers are able to make and/or fit safety equipment themselves. The advantages are that it is much cheaper for the farmer, because there are no labour costs, and the equipment, for example a tractor, does not have to leave the farm. Specifications would need to be developed so that farmers can manufacture and fit their own safety equipment for older machinery.

These specifications must be freely available, in an easy step-by-step format and include charts and diagrams. Where required, WorkSafe would be responsible for undertaking certification of the work. We believe that external certification should then attract a rebate. For example, with the fitting of rollover protection, I know a lot of farmers who would have been able to put that on themselves, but you would then have to have external certification before they would be able to access the rebate.

**Ms EASTON** — I am going to talk about adult education and its relevance to farm safety issues. Learning occurs when people become aware of the significance of their own life experiences and they are able to combine these with new knowledge and skills. Opportunities for formal education in rural areas are often restricted. This is often because of the distance and pre-existing social and community timetables. So you might be offering the greatest training in the world absolutely free, but everyone else in the area is off to CFA, CWA, Landcare, parent teacher interviews or sports functions, no-one is going to turn up. Many farmers are past middle age. Their work is physically demanding with long hours, and whether it is justified or not, there is a perception that farming income has shrunk and cost of production has risen.

Many farmers have not received formal education beyond secondary school. They all have the normal range of demands on their free time that family and community make. Unless there is substitute labour available, and that is not very frequently because it is quite costly, time out for education is time off the job, and it has to be valued up with longer hours and over time, and they have to do it through giving up family or recreational time. They have a priority on survival first and then get on with the rest of things.

Most adults, and farmers are no exception, have well-developed ideas about life. They have their own sets of beliefs and values. To conceive that you would need to learn something else, something new, can feel like there is something not quite right about your existing set of values.

In addition the history of adult education has possibly fuelled scepticism about its worth among rural consumers. If you go along to a course and waste your time because you have not learnt anything or you thought the presenter was pretty useless, you do not go back for anything else.

New knowledge can be challenging to previously held beliefs to the extent that an adult, particularly those with a lower level of education, can be unwilling to participate. This can only come with appropriately conceived and well-designed educational programs based on solid, credible information delivered in delivered in a friendly and cooperative environment. Patronising delivery by presenters who hold secure, desk-bound jobs and the issuing of certificates of participation will not achieve a greater willingness to acquire knowledge and apply it.
Imposition of onerous regulations, lengthy paperwork and financial penalties will also be ineffective in achieving cultural change required for improved safety practices. Rural trainers are the key to the success of programs, but they need practical exposure to the business of farming to conduct courses for those in remote and isolated circumstances who are effectively going about the business of feeding the country.

Serious consideration needs to be given to alternative modes of vocational education delivery, for example videoconferencing and the Internet. This approach would require current telecommunication technology. What we have in rural Australia often falls short of current technology.

In conclusion, an effective farm safety program for today should have a solid educational design base, and it needs to be available in a range of non-threatening formats and locations, have an obvious beneficial outcome, and be cost-effective for the farmer. Practical solutions need to be developed in conjunction with the farming community and educational designers.

Ms HALLETT — I also want to finish off with education promotion. I was very interested in what you were talking about with the previous people. We came up with a few suggestions. We thought WorkSafe needs to find ways to more effectively communicate safe practices on farms. One suggestion is to work through local groups and existing networks. This is the best way you can get the information out there. For example, at the local CFA or Landcare meeting you might offer a very brief health check. You could test things like reflexes, blood pressure or stress levels — something that is short and adds maybe an extra half hour to the meeting. We have the people there anyway.

We believe there should be additional WorkSafe field officers employed whose primary role would be to promote farm safety and entice farmers to adopt safer work practices. Key selection criteria should include (1) excellent interpersonal and communication skills, (2) farming background or extensive practical experience in a farming enterprise and (3) the ability to relate well to farmers and talk their own language. I feel that these field officers could operate very much like field reps from chemical or fertiliser companies. Basically they call, meet the farmer and have a general chat. They get to know who you are and not press anything else to start with. Over time, as trust is built up, they could introduce ideas of farm safety and they could suggest a safety audit. They could conduct a trial safety audit in a non-threatening way.

These field officers could make suggestions of things that need to be fixed before a proper audit. They are also able to conduct a safety audit when asked for, but we believe these safety audits should be voluntary. It is far better for the farmer to ask to have that safety audit done than force it on him.

These field officers could also arrange certification on safety equipment that has been fitted to machinery — that is, if farmers are able to apply it themselves They also need to have a variety of information on farm safety but only give what is requested. Farmers hate being given a whole heap of stuff that is often irrelevant. You ask about one thing but you get a lot of stuff about everything else. You do not read it, and it is just so much paperwork. As we said before, work with existing groups and networks to offer brief, relevant training sessions. Farmers need to build up trust with people. They like to know people, put a face to a name, trust them, and then they will start asking for the information. If you have someone a farmer does not know just come onto their farm, their back is up in a lot of cases and they will not listen to them. The comment that the local person for WorkSafe is very good, I would agree with. We feel that that type of person is the only one who could really operate this sort of thing — that is, those selection criteria are really extremely important, otherwise it just would not work.

The CHAIR — That is the answer to your question from before, Peter.

Mr WALSH — Can I ask one to follow on, then: depending on what measure you have, we have 28 000 to 35 000 farmers in Victoria. How many WorkSafe officers are we going to have to have the time to build that trust and do those things? It would be a huge number.

Ms HALLETT — I do not know how you would get around to everybody. I really do not. But I just think that it is a very, very difficult one because farmers work by themselves so much of the time and they are very wary of government people, especially coming onto their place. That does vary. If farmers are exposed to them through something else, eg. the evening we held last year, as I said, was a social night. We had various guest speakers, including one of the deputy coroners, come down. Local farmers actually got to know who some of these people working on farm safety are. Most people would not have known who the local WorkSafe person was before that.
night. Farmers have now heard him speak, and I am sure that there would be some farmer who would never had
dreamt of ringing him before now who probably could. Farmer like to have made contact first. I do not know how
you get around to all the farmers — I really do not know. There was a suggestion that if it were possible to have
some sort of system it would just reach out a lot better than expecting people to come in to courses. The latter just
does not seem to work.

Mr WALSH — Then the challenge we have is that we always get the early adapters who come to these
things, so that in some ways we are preaching to the converted. How do we get to the last adapters, I suppose is the
question, because they are the ones who are at risk, usually.

Ms HALLETT — Last year when we had this dinner a particular gentleman was very antagonistic to the
WorkSafe fellow there. It is interesting. He lives opposite the president of our group and every time he sees her he
throws in comments about farm safety et cetera. She said, ‘At least he’s thinking about farm safety now. We have
started something; he is starting to think about it, and hopefully on his place he might start to act. The particular
farmer was not indicative of the sort of people there. We were actually very surprised with the comments he came
out with. Most of the other people found the evening very informative and very enjoyable, if you could at least start
reaching these people to start with, and then giving them start to think. You will not change them overnight but at
least you can get them starting to think that we do have to be careful with our safety, especially with workers and
children and family on the farm.

Mr WALSH — At what point do we then go from educating and building trust to enforcement?

Ms HALLETT — I think that would vary with what you are trying to enforce, basically. What example
would you be looking at?

Mr WALSH — Well, the general safety of the whole farm. We have had workshops. We have had this
group, or whatever, come in and do it. We have employed WorkSafe officers who have been friendly to everyone
for three years. Do we then go back and start doing audits? I would have thought that as a public policy we cannot
just keep trying to teach people forever. In the end the ROPS subsidy ran out and people had to put one on
otherwise they were liable. There has to be a point where you transfer from teaching to enforcement.

Ms EASTON — I guess you would probably look at that time frame as a political decision, is it not?

Ms HALLETT — Yes, it is, really.

Mr INGRAM — In your recommendations under education and promotion — I do not know if you
mentioned it during your presentation — you say that WorkSafe should change the title of workplace inspector to a
less threatening title. That has come through in a fair amount of our evidence, just that the label might be a big
threatening.

Ms HALLETT — I have actually been told that they are called field officers. That is why we did not raise
that one. We feel that is actually a far better term.

Ms EASTON — I think farmers tend to work fairly independently and they are used to making their own
decisions as they need to. They do not like anyone coming in and imposing something on them. They get their back
up if they feel that they are being forced to do something that they have not thought about first and have not
actually had the chance to filter it through and make that decision for themselves. I think education has to go down
that path. It is a generational thing. You are going to be doing it for an awfully long time before it is sort of the
natural way of thinking. People who are not highly educated tend to be more reactive to new ways of doing things
than people who are more educated and used to thinking about new ideas. You have a huge spectrum of farmers
with all sorts of operations and all sorts of skills and areas of working. Something has to be brought in to cover it. I
think that with more groups like Wellington working in conjunction with WorkSafe and the field officers — —

Mr WALSH — Do not underestimate the ability of farmers to change if they can see a benefit.

Ms EASTON — No. But that benefit often has to be put right in their face. Sometimes it is not apparent.
Mr WALSH — But if they can see a new pasture or a new tool that will do their farm good, they will be very quick to adopt it. Somehow we need to package this so that it is seen to be a benefit as well.

Ms EASTON — Yes. I think it is in the packaging rather than the actual message.

Ms HALLETT — Also with the audits, we believe that an incentive scheme works better than the big stick, if you were able to offer an incentive where they were able to get discounts off WorkCover premiums or insurance or something like that. I just think that if they had a safety audit — they had someone come and do a safety audit on their farm — there should be some sort of incentive there. It will take time, and you will have some people who will never do it, for sure. You might have to get the big stick out for those. Do not ask me the time frame, though. I think the incentive would encourage a lot of people over a period of about two to three years; it would not happen overnight.

The CHAIR — Can I just change the topic a tiny bit. It would not be a complete hearing if we did not have a question about all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and they have not quite come up. Do you as a group have any thoughts on the use of ATVs on farms as a particular piece of machinery and what is the way forward to actually encourage the safer use of ATVs or just safety around the actual ATVs? I know most farmers everywhere seem to have a specific use for them.

Ms HALLETT — We do not actually have an ATV at all. The whole concept of running our farm safety evening last year came from a mother talking about ATVs on the farm and kids not wearing helmets and those sorts of things. I know that a lot of people do bang their head against a brick wall, even within their own family, in trying to make people wear helmets and any safety gear. I think the biggest problem is just that ATVs were not designed for farm use originally and they do tip over so easily. ATVs are very useful, obviously, because as you said, most farmers have them. Companies have actually developed a lot of implements that can make an ATV more easily tipped over. That needs to be addressed. I can see why people use ATVs, though we personally do not. Kids love them; they love to ride on them.

Ms EASTON — I do not know whether I should answer that; I might incriminate myself. I do not wear a helmet, but I do not go fast either.

Mr WALSH — That is not an excuse.

Dr NAPTHINE — Only a little bit over!

Mr MITCHELL — Only a little bit dead!

Mr INGRAM — Do you want to go back to before we made those comments?

Ms EASTON — I think it really addresses the issue of why people do not wear helmets.

Dr NAPTHINE — Why do you not wear a helmet, apart from ruining your beautiful hair?

Ms EASTON — I could not do anything with that! It is just uncomfortable and restrictive; they are heavy.

The CHAIR — Would you wear one if an accessible, affordable, lightweight and practical helmet was produced?

Ms EASTON — Like a bike helmet?

The CHAIR — Something practical and accessible, and you would have to see the benefits of it. Obviously there are a lot of issues around wearing a broad-brimmed hat. Obviously it means that you do not get skin cancer eventually.

Mr INGRAM — Can I throw the question a bit wider? I know Anita’s family has horses. Does Anita let her children ride horses without wearing a helmet? Why should we treat motorbikes differently?

Ms HALLETT — I agree with that. My children do wear helmets. I have one who would like not to, but I have said, ‘The decision is not yours until you are 18’.
Dr NAPTHINE — Give me that recipe!

Ms HALLETT — If the children do any horse-riding competition they have to wear a helmet. If the kids are brought up with it right from the word ‘go’ it becomes routine that they will put a helmet on. We make sure they have proper boots on and the helmet on, then they are allowed to ride their horses. They are not allowed to ride otherwise. I agree that the current motorbike helmets are very uncomfortable and heavy. Someone needs to look at developing something that is more specific. I feel problems also need to be addressed with the ATVs themselves, with the fact they do seem to easily tip — you will not eliminate all of the problems — but as I said especially using implements, trailers and spray units. That is why they are so convenient. It is because there are so many attachments they have. That needs to be looked at as well. What is happening with the coroner’s inquiry into ATVs?

Dr NAPTHINE — It is ongoing. We are all waiting with bated breath.

The CHAIR — Kerry, do you think that if they were practical that would encourage people to wear them?

Ms EASTON — I think it would. There would be less resistance. I have a pushbike helmet. I do not wear it because there has been a lot of publicity that they are not safe for bikes. I suppose in some respects it is safer than not wearing one.

Mr WALSH — Do you expect your children to wear a helmet if they ride the ATV?

Ms EASTON — No, but we do not let other people’s kids ride it. It is my own family only.

Dr NAPTHINE — Are your children over 16?

Ms EASTON — My youngest is 15.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you know there is a sign on them saying you should not ride them until you are over 16?

Ms EASTON — No, because ours has not got one.

The CHAIR — It is not a law.

Ms EASTON — I can see where the sticker has been, but it was a second-hand purchase so it is not there.

Dr NAPTHINE — We are all guilty; I understand that, and that is one of the dilemmas, is it not?

Ms EASTON — It is very difficult. How do you enforce things? As I said, it comes down to whether or not the child understands safe practices.

The CHAIR — Are there any further things you want to talk about?

Ms HALLETT — The only other thing is that I am concerned about are the farm statistics.

Mr WALSH — That has been raised in quite a few places.

Ms HALLETT — As I said, if you really look at it and pull out the over-55s and recreational accidents the statistics are nowhere near as high. I know you cannot pull those totally out, but with recreational ones and domestic ones I wonder why they are there — and hobby farmer ones. As I said, you do not put hobby anything else in their workplace statistics, why are they being put into farm statistics? Anyone who becomes a hobby farmer can buy or borrow a tractor, with no experience and all of a sudden they are in the farm statistics. That is all.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.