RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Seymour — 14 April 2004

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Witnesses

Cr M. Dalmau, mayor (sworn); and
Mr D. Hogan, chief executive officer (sworn), Shire of Murrindindi.
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 that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, under the provisions of the Constitution Act is granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. For the purposes of the transcript, please state your full name and address. If you represent an organisation, please state the name of the organisation and your role within that organisation.

Cr DALMAU — My name is Michael John Dalmau; I live at 124 Acheron Road, Acheron. I am the mayor of Murrindindi Shire Council.

Mr HOGAN — My name is Daniel David Hogan. My address is 45 Southam Drive, Taggerty. I am the chief executive officer of the Shire of Murrindindi.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Could you make a brief presentation, then we will ask some questions afterwards?

Mr HOGAN — I thank the members of this parliamentary committee for the opportunity to make a presentation here today. We will speak about a document that has been distributed to you. It should provide a little bit of background. The comments that have been included in this submission are based around what was produced about three years ago — that is, the Safer Murrindindi Safety Plan that came out of the Safety Cities and Shires program. I suppose it produced a more holistic view on safety and how it should be promoted across the whole community of Murrindindi. It did not talk only about farm safety, but also feelings of safety and general perceptions. The comments in here are an extraction of a document that has a broad range of community discussion over a period of time.

The theme that Murrindindi council is coming from is that it farm safety is a process of education and also recognition by the various agencies that are associated with the operation of farms, and that safety is a critical element of what needs to be incorporated into the mindset of those who are involved. We think it is important that farm safety programs are embedded into the school system, because there are a lot of children who are either on the farm scene, helping on the farm, helping on the tractors and those sorts of things. The information that we have indicates that they influence their parents at times, and that they pass on information to their parents about how to operate in a safe manner. We think there is a lot to be gained from working with the VFF to promote farm safety, and that is outlined in the submission as well. Marketing campaigns are an important component of what needs to be done to promote the whole theme of farm safety.

As a council we also are closely associated with the emergency management groups that often finish up at the end of the day being caught up in responding to accidents that have taken place on the farm, so we think it is important that agencies which provide the emergency support at that point in time can also be strong influences and also provide feedback that needs to be taken on board.

My own experience is that there is a lot of evidence gained from people who attend accidents and injuries around the place. Those people can provide comments and feedback to the farm and the industry on what actually has gone wrong and caused those accidents. I was associated with the death of a farmer about two or three years ago. The situation was that a Melbourne cocky came up and had his tractor wheels pointing in the wrong direction. He pulled a stump up and he was climbing up a hill. There was roll bar, but that accident resulted in a fatality. It showed that there is a lack of knowledge of farm safety practices, particularly among the new residents who are coming into our district.

I was involved in a seminar about 12 months ago, and one of the comments I recall coming out of it was about how new farmers learn about farming and what their key sources of information were. The key theories were that they were going to be the Internet, farm trade manuals, TAFE course and all those sorts of things, but the evidence passed on at that session showed that the main source of information was the guy who lived on the farm next door. The practices one person was learning were coming either from the good or bad practices of the person who happened to be operating on the other side of the fence. It seems very important to have the guy on the other side of the fence pretty well trained on how to behave in a safe manner as well, because he seems to be the mechanism being used to pass on information from one generation of farmers to the next. It was an interesting reflection on the way the education process works.
At Murrindindi council this program ran out of steam. We were funded at a state government level and we achieved a lot out of it, but at the end of the day we could not ultimately support a lot of the programs that were raised. We believe it is important that the safety programs or the education programs that are considered to be important are funded in a way to assist the various groups to achieve their ends.

Cr DALMAU — From a local government perspective, when the Safer Murrindindi Safety Plan was operating we had the ability to bring various agencies and interests together, and to bring new people coming into an area together, to be a very strong conduit and also to create the synergies required to get those messages out to the people.

Dr NAPTHINE — When you get new landowners purchasing land in your municipality, what information do you give them? I understand there are certain requirements in terms of planning to advise them that they are moving to a rural area which has certain issues. Are you required or do you provide any information about responsibilities of managing land with respect to, say, weeds, animal health and occupational health and safety on a farm in a rural environment? Do you provide any of that sort of information?

Mr HOGAN — The majority of information is about being a good neighbour in terms of planning, noxious weeds and those types of things. As a council those issues tend to be at the sharp end of what we deal with. There are also issues involving neighbourhood disputes and about behaviour to each other. Our resources have been focused more on making sure that people are good custodians of the land and are good neighbours to each other.

Cr DALMAU — Maybe I can take over there. We have recognised that as a problem, and we have been doing a lot of work at the moment on the stewardship of our land and how that can be best done. We are going through a process of amending our planning scheme for rezoning and other issues, but part of what we are doing is recognising that people who come into our area for lifestyle purposes predominantly are going to be taking over land, therefore as the stewards of the land we have developed some rural living development guidelines. They will be part of the amendment process that we are going through at the moment. The rural living development guidelines basically do take in a lot of your concerns, Dr Naphine. Such issues as biodiversity, erosion, weeds, pests and animals, local government infrastructure needs are all taken into consideration. Basically we are talking about natural resource management, and we are talking about whole farm plans that have to support an application for subdivision or the ability to take over custodial rights of this land. So it is really putting the onus back onto them for the stewardship of the land. If the people who come in do not have the expertise, they have to go and source it and provide something to us in the proper manner for a whole farm plan.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you have a kit that you give new landowners, and can you provide a copy to the committee?

Mr HOGAN — Yes, we do.

Dr NAPTHINE — With regard to your Safer Murrindindi safety plan, you said it has run out of steam through running out of funding. Do you have any evidence of its effectiveness?

Mr HOGAN — The issues that came out of the plan were issues about perceptions. Safety was a broad term, and it was driven by the police at the time as well. The statistics showed that overall Murrindindi was seen to be a safe place to be. What came out of it, though, was that there was an issue associated with lack of volunteerism. The various agencies that support the Safer Murrindindi program were struggling because of the ageing population and not having new people coming into the shire. The biggest achievement we have got out of that is the creation of a year 9 volunteer program through the schools. Every child at secondary school level is now embedded in a range of organisations across the shire. We believe that will result in a greater understanding by the kids of the importance of picking up their community responsibilities. In terms of evidence, this program finished in late 2001, so it is only two years old, and it never really went past public education.

Cr DALMAU — One of the things we did towards the end of it — because for a lot of the earlier time the funding went into producing the plan and getting the input — was that we were able to hold a field day where we invited a lot of landowners to participate, and we had a lot of the agencies involved in showing where their expertise and knowledge was coming from. That was a way of bringing the different agencies and the various
members of the community together and educating them. We were able to do that, and it was a very fruitful and very well-attended day at that time.

Mr Hogan — One of those field days was held about six months ago, and it showed how keen the new residents into the area were to learn about how to be good managers and custodians. It was an overflowing sort of a day — there were not enough chairs, there were not enough drinks and there was not enough of everything else, because it went far beyond our expectations. We feel it is very fertile ground for being able to take it further for the people who are consciously making decisions to move into our area, which is a good sign.

Cr Dalmau — When you are involved with local government you have a wider circle, including Landcare groups, and the Landcare field days have been a very good way of getting new land-holders together and enabling them to make friendships with their neighbours and learn what are good and bad practices. There is a very positive feel out there, and there are a lot of people wanting to do the right thing but needing the knowledge.

The Chair — What was the level of the funding you received for the Safer Murrindindi program, and what level of funding do you think would be required to run a sustainable program into the future to build on that work you have done?

Mr Hogan — There was basically a single full-time funded officer doing it. However, as I said, this was dealing with the broad aspects of safety across the municipality. The solutions that were proposed for farm safety tended to be to fund programs for those various agencies to be able to promote what they do. The funding probably equates to 50 per cent of a person to cover these roles, but that is a guess. It is a wet finger in the air.

Cr Dalmau — We were not able to continue that as a local government unit. As a small rural council, we did not have the resources behind us to continue. We were funding our share, but basically because of the old syndrome of cost shifting we could not continue to provide the resources to fully fund that program.

Mr Mitchell — On the safety plan, you said there was a bit of collaboration with local groups — emergency services, the VFF and so on. Have you approached them and asked them to contribute some sort of funding or initiatives? How supportive have they been?

Cr Dalmau — We have a municipal emergency plan that brings a lot of the emergency services together, so we continue to work with them. Some of what has come out of that program is still being used in that respect, so it has not been completely wasted. However, we have not been able to achieve the benefits that we could achieve if the program were fully resourced. But when that funding was coming to an end, we certainly did try to talk to the agencies involved about that. They were not able to fund it either, because they have their jobs to do. As the CEO mentioned earlier, a lot of the agencies deal with the end result, and yes, they gain knowledge from the end result about how something could have been done better to avoid an accident, but unless they have a mechanism to field that through to get that education out to the people, that information held by the emergency services people is being wasted as well. There needs to be an avenue for collecting that information and getting it out into the community in the form of public education, especially in areas like Murrindindi, where we have a lot of new people coming in from the Melbourne area.

The Chair — Thank you very much, Mike and Danny. You will receive a copy of the transcript, and you can correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.