RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Bendigo – 20 May 2004

Members

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

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

Staff

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

Witness

Mr J. S. Scott, broiler farmer.
The CHAIR — John, I know you have been here for the whole time, so you know the original statement. This is the comments from the floor section. If you could give us your presentation and there may or may not be questions afterwards, but the rules are the same. You will receive a copy of the transcript, and any obvious errors of fact or grammar may be corrected but not matters of substance. It will be recorded as a public document.

Mr SCOTT — I am John Symons Scott of 74 Barnes Road, Marong, Victoria. My main occupation these days is a broiler farmer, but my background is nearly 10 years in the agriculture education division at Dookie prior to taking up poultry farming down in Bendigo. I have been down here in the vicinity of 30-odd years — maybe 34 or something like that.

I come from way back when most people had relations on farms. You visited and learned about things on the farm, as opposed to what happens among the general population now. There is a considerable change in that area. There was a comment about learning to drive and not being under 15 and things like that. I can remember my cousin teaching me to drive a tractor, and I do not think he would have been 15 at the time. Times have changed, tractors have changed and things like that. But you did have a sense that you were not invulnerable even then.

Problems are occurring at the moment, and you may or may not have heard this, but my observation is that generally farmers are starting to be overworked — they are tired and they are starting to make mistakes — and I think that is probably where more accidents are coming from than anything else. Your first witness indicated what could be done around the general farmyard with kids involved. It is not easy. You have a lot of farmers wives having to create income by working off the farm, and they still have the problem of where do they get child care, or if they leave the children at home who is going to supervise them. If you look at the statistics the general farming population is getting older. I am a couple of birthdays past when theoretically I might have retired, but there does not seem to be any chance of that. I reckon I have come down to working 40 hours a week instead of 80 hours a week, but literally that is what farmers are doing.

You have had no other farmer here today. You have picked a time when normally, if it had rained, they would have been out working their tractors. With half an inch of rain there 24 hours or so ago tractors have been working out my way there for 24 hours, and they have not stopped. That would be going on right around the district normally at this time of the year. To stop and come to something like this and try to give an opinion, most farmers just could not do it.

But where I am coming from, we have WorkCover ads showing accidents and farming widows and the whole deal. As far as I can see the cockies are getting enough doom and gloom without having that, and I think the advertising is misplaced. It should be more about showing them how to get to not have those accidents rather than be doom and gloom all the time where you get more and more regulations getting rammed down everybody’s throat.

In my experience I just cannot see with the way things are going at the present time how anybody would bother going into farming. This brings up the point that the population is getting older, the younger people will not come onto the farms because they can see dad working 70 or 80 hours a week most of the time, and if they get a drought or something they can be wiped out in 12 months, 2 years or whatever and get down to almost zero again.

In the case of this WorkCover you have got at the moment they are saying that they are going to audit farms. I do not know whether that means they are going to audit them and clamp or audit and show. If they were to audit and help it would be a sight better than going around and saying, ‘That’s wrong! You’re down for a fine’ or something like that. There seems to be the attitude, whether it is speeding or whatever, that everybody is wrong, and I think that that attitude is getting pushed to the farming community more than anywhere else. They are not allowed to work after 10.00 p.m. because the machine is making a noise, or it is creating dust, or the lights are flashing as they go around the paddock, and the next-door neighbour has just moved out from town with their four-wheel-drive and they do not like it. Literally this is going on.

There is no right to farm in the state. Everybody says, ‘We’ll have a right to farm bill go through, but it will be to best practice’, but what is best practice? It is in the eyes of the beholder. If you are in a commercial area you are allowed to do commercial things at a commercial time but you are not allowed to do farming things in a farming area if it annoys the next-door neighbour because the EPA will come in and decide that you are making a noise after midnight or something. That happens at my place — not the EPA coming in — but the possibility that the neighbour might complain because they can hear forklifts operating. You have probably all seen cases of farmers being closed down for using grape harvesting machinery and this sort of thing. You are not allowed to cross the
20 May 2004 Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee 3

road in the middle of the night and you are not allowed to work then because there is noise. The list could go on and on.

There seem to be more and more regulations since we have been deregulated than there ever were when we were not. At the moment I have two papers out there on deregulation. There would be nearly an inch of paper involved between the processes and the VFF demands. All this is causing stress. The thing I wanted to bring to your notice was the fact that the farmer seems to be forever wronged.

Mr WALSH — What is the issue related to farm safety though?

Mr SCOTT — The issue is that they are working tired, they are being kept awake at night worrying about where the job is going to, and they are starting to make mistakes. Plenty of farmers have climbed up silos without a harness and the what-have-you that have just come in for over 2 metres and the rest of it. Some of them have had accidents, I admit, no worries, but there are older and older people trying to continue farming when they should be out of it. I should be out of it probably. But the point is that I do not get a pension, my son is taking over the farm, and what do you do? You just have to keep going. If you have a doom-and-gloom situation you are not going to get the people to come in and take over those farms. The families are leaving the farms.

The point I really wanted to make is this: when you are looking at these farm injury issues, talk up what you can do and arrange to have tuition in how to work machinery. I am an agricultural diplomat from Longerenong. We were told how to operate a tractor or whatever machine was going and the things that could go wrong. But the students now are getting less and less practical work. They started off at about fifty-fifty classroom and practical work 40-odd years ago. In some courses now they are lucky to get one day a month going out on practical work. The practical work seems to have gone out of the technical college, where the students got hands-on experience using tools, and all these things go towards making somebody that is competent to work on a farm. The issue is really that employees, or workers, are being dumbed down. Everything has to be that safe that nothing will ever go wrong. Then they start not looking to see what can go wrong. Do you follow what I am trying to get at?

The biggest issue I think is depression in the farming community. They are thought to be wrong. They have to follow up that all their food production is safe and that sort of thing. It is impinging on their quality of life and that is impinging on their operating status when they are out on the farm. They are thinking of things they should not have to think about while they actually operating, and they are operating when they are so tired. This is going on with most of the people that I know in the farming industry. They are all commenting on the same thing. They are worried that if somebody had an accident and WorkCover came in they would find all sorts of bothers going on. It is a punitive sort of a system rather than a system that encourages. It appears to be that way to me anyway. I think it would be better if WorkCover went the other way and encouraged field days and things like the demonstration unit that you are talking about up at Ouyen or somewhere. That was the main area I wanted to bring out.

There was a comment on tractor roll bars. When I tried to get tractor roll bars small enough to use in my chicken sheds it was impossible to get them. Because of the overhead gear of the feeders and drinkers and this sort of thing we could not find a roll bar that was made. My agent tried several times and several places to get roll bars when the subsidy was on for roll bars and they could not find a suitable roll bar that would not destroy thousands of dollars worth of gear in the shed if you took it into the shed.

The only one we got was with a fold-down on a Kubota, and because it was a T-type roll bar on the back it picked up the drinker lines at the ends of the sheds and promptly ripped everything down out of the walls. So when it was folded down we literally had to take it off the machine. That was capable of splitting in the centre and the only other one was a Ferguson, which has to be rolled down when it is in the shed and then it can be put up when it is outside. But to get a machine that would fit into chicken sheds was almost impossible. It has to be under 2 metres and even then you are likely to wipe something out if you happen to get into a bit of a heap of manure or something pushing up on the tractor tilt. So it is very difficult to get hold of machinery with suitable roll bars to do the job.

Whether somebody is designing lower down-type roll bars I do not know, but I certainly have not been able to find them. I don’t know whether I can answer any questions that you might come at from another direction?

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, are there any questions at all? No. We will take your points down, and I think especially the way WorkCover does things and your points that it should be encouraging.
Mr SCOTT — I have not had an experience with WorkCover by the way, but that is my feeling as to what is happening.

The CHAIR — I think you might be right.

Mr SCOTT — It is all doom and gloom instead of, ‘What can we show them that shows how it ought to be done’. And I think that would be the far better way because people are losing contact with the probabilities of things going wrong. It is all very well saying have a cover on the shaft. I had a trainee staff six or eight months ago, and I was showing him round the tractor. The first thing he did was walk across the top of the power take off shaft. I said, ‘Well if you want to be singing soprano you do that when the tractor is going because you cannot rely that that tube is not going to suddenly catch and take you with it’. So he was coming out of the town, and he was safe because the tractor was stopped. But he could have been dumped on that tractor on any other farm without any tuition at all, and he might have done the same thing when the tractor was running.

The CHAIR — We have seen the photographic evidence. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.