RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Sea Lake – 24 March 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

Witness

Mr N. Simpson, Farmer (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome. 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 all present at these hearings 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 by witnesses outside the committee hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms.

For the purpose of the transcript would you please give your full name and address. If you are representing an organisation, please state your role in that organisation.

Mr SIMPSON — My name is Robert Neil Simpson. My address is Drury Road, Berriwillock 3531 — box 3, if you want to stick that one in.

The CHAIR — If you do not mind providing brief comments, we will ask you some questions afterwards. I have been informed that, had you been asked to give us your date of birth today, we would have known that it is your birthday, so happy birthday from all of us.

Mr SIMPSON — Your sentiments are appreciated. As a general position, you invited me to come; I did not invite myself here, but probably for the sake of efficiency you wish to ask me questions. I did bring this video, in which I appear. If I look red on the cover, it is because we started filming at 5 in the morning on a cool day, but it ended up at 44 degrees Celsius and I was sunburnt. There is the proof.

This video, for those who are not conversant with it, which was made in cooperation between WorkSafe and the Victorian Farmers Federation. I guess if I represent anyone I would be very happy to be associated with the VFF, which I believe is a major contributor to the Australian community, and the Victorian community in particular.

Mr INGRAM — One of the things that has come to us fairly clearly through the inquiry is that there is an element of the farm community who undertake risk too regularly. They have a bit of a gung-ho attitude, and that creates a certain amount of the accidents. Do you have a comment on that? I understand that at home you have made a number of simple alterations to equipment to make it safer, and that is what part of the video is about. Do you want to make any comments about why some farmers in your view lack that foresight to see the risks that are there?

Mr SIMPSON — There is fair bit in that, so we will try not to be here at 8.00 o’clock tonight.

Generally speaking farmers are careless — that is a generalisation — with the time they allocate to do a task, and in that lies the risk. In other words, they feel that they are meeting deadlines, and therefore it is perhaps an endemic sort of a problem in that respect. I guess that is why I was happy to go on the video. Contrasting with that urgency, the industry has not always been rewarding to people engaged in farming; it tends to be a lifestyle thing. You tend to work harder to make up the time. When you get tired is when the troubles tend to set in.

Conversely we have the slight risk of rules and regulations, which are applied for the best reasons in the world, becoming a pain in the neck. We are going into a series of that now. We are finding for all the right reasons that we should apply certain things that for a farmer in most respects are quite impractical. If you are a builder, to have scaffolding is necessary, but what does a farmer do now? He is not going to be allowed to get up on the back of his truck on a ladder. Unfortunately I would suggest that those sorts of regulations tend to bring resentment and perhaps conflict in that sense. Before regulations are brought in they should be perhaps discussed pretty fully with the likes of the VFF, which would try and see that they are applied in a very practical sense.

Dr NAPTHINE — The ROPS scheme for tractors has been universally accepted throughout our program, and throughout Victoria and Australia. It is a very successful program. There is encouragement, a bit of regulation and education all working hand in glove. Do you believe safety access platforms need to be adopted as a similar sort of program? How can we improve the take-up or the implementation of safety access platforms?

Mr SIMPSON — I think by your question we are really talking about smaller tractors that do not have inbuilt cabins and so forth, which incorporate rollover protection anyway, but for the lighter tractor it is a narrow thing. I have been working with a platform and there are times when it is a darn nuisance — in other words, you can see why the manufacturer in fact almost treated it in a minimalist way in not putting a platform on. But the
24 March 2004 Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee

video Farm Safety: how one Victorian farmer has made it happen to some degree applies to the elderly, and a young bloke would probably tend to discard some of those protective things, or curse them. You used to fly over the back seat of the tractor from the back and land on it like a horse once, but now you go around the side and see how big the step is and throw a leg over that way. I think it would not be greeted too well. In regard to the particular aspect you refer to, I think the manufacturers actually have sufficient safeguards there.

As for the smaller tractor, the worry is that you might fall in front of the back wheels, whereas with most of the big machines you just could not even if you tried. But crazy things go on: farmers have a break down in the electrical starter circuit and they put their screwdriver in and they bridge the terminals and start their tractors that way, and forget they have left it in gear, and they become another statistic.

Dr NAPTHINE — So what do you see as the next way forward in terms of farmer safety? That is what the committee is struggling with. As I say, rollover protection stood out like an expired parking meter, it was implemented and everyone said, ‘Fantastic! What do we do now?’. The committee has heard a lot of talk about education and all those things that are nice, but do you see anything as being a definitive program that should be undertaken to improve farmer safety?

Mr SIMPSON — I guess the State Coroner is probably the best person to ask where the greatest dangers show up statistically. Nothing is strongly evident. Again, I guess I have tended to be negative by suggesting we can get overregulated, and then you get a reaction. I cannot really itemise anything.

Mr WALSH — As a generalisation, are farmers safer now than they used to be in terms of the machinery and stuff that we use?

Mr SIMPSON — Yes, they are, decidedly. I would have to say yes to that. I think the younger generation are sensitive to using their heads a bit more. My generation tended to go and get the work done and at the end of the day we did other things. Now I find that my son will go in and work on the computer and do that before he goes out to work sometimes. I am not trying to put him in a bad light, but that I think in that process you see better thinking processes occurring.

We have a full-time share farmer who works for us, and he is really our responsibility. I have seen my son — and I would not have done this — call him up on the radio and say, ‘You do not have your earmuffs on. You will damage your years’, and things like that. I am not sure if earmuffs are compulsory or not. Are they? But that is terribly important and it shows up when you get into your 60s, I can tell you. If you are still married you have some howling in your ear and wondering, ‘Does he hear or doesn’t he, or is it in fact a way out?’.

Probably hearing is one of the things. Perhaps I could have responded to your question a bit better in regard to protecting your hearing and so forth, because after all that becomes a risk factor later on.

Mr WALSH — If we look at the statistics, the greater percentage of farm death and injury involves older men or young children around the farms. How do we get cultural change? I do not think regulation will change older men in particular because they are pretty set in their ways. How do we get cultural change among the at-risk people and how do we do things to stop the risk to young children?

Mr SIMPSON — I guess by exposing them at a young and impressionable age. Children from the school here go to field days such as at Ouyen, where they have farm safety programs on Ian Hastings’s property. I have heard my grandchildren talk about and bring up matters that came out of that dialogue. I think especially in a rural community that almost ought to be a compulsory subject. But certainly the heads of the schools here are bussing kids in to go to that, and I believe there is quite a coverage of that. You might be more familiar with that than me, but I think you probably have to start them at a young age.

Mr WALSH — What about the older men, though?

Mr SIMPSON — Well — expendable! I just get back to the point that you need to think about giving yourself time to do a task. That is the only thing I can think of. You have suggested that in fact things have become built into their psyche at that stage, and they do not easily take to changing habitual practices, so all you can invite them to do is to think. For example, powerlines around farms are obviously quite a serious problem with the earth return, so that the moment you touch the wire you are history. I would say there really should not be any buildings built under powerlines, but some funny things end up under powerlines, especially with big farm trucks, and semis
tipping up. A death occurred in those sorts of circumstances not far from here about 15 years ago: a chap tipped his truck up just to do a practice in the paddock and was wiped out.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What comments, either positive or negative, have you received about that video, particularly from older farmers? Also, with respect to Workcover, have you had any experience with Workcover inspectors; and has there been any proactive stuff done with Workcover and councils in this district in terms of not punitive measures but actually educational inspections, if you like? I have heard that one shire up at Robinvale has done that sort of thing.

Mr SIMPSON — Has it? I am unaware of Worksafe having come down to ground level and talking to people, but I guess we are a bit sparse up in this part of the world.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you think they should?

Mr SIMPSON — That is probably like sending the policeman around to tell the children to stop being naughty, isn’t it? I think education still has to be the way to go.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That is what I am talking about: about WorkCover — I am sorry, I mean WorkSafe — being part of an educative process.

Mr SIMPSON — I must say that the people that I worked with on this video were just incredibly serious about their activity. They did not have to say they cared; they obviously were committed to their role in the community. That was actually the most impressive thing, and maybe in that there is perhaps an opportunity, and maybe they should instigate work days.

But I have had a lot of inquiries out of that video. Your first question was in fact about whether older people relate to this. Undoubtedly the ones that call up — I get about one phone call a week, I guess — ask about climbing silos. It obviously is something that, for whatever reason, older people still feel they have to do. Part of the video shows the windows in the silos. I did not have them on my farm until we did this video. I was always worried that these little windows would be covered internally with dust and you would not see, but I was astonished: it is black and white, you can tell where the grain level is. They are really marvellous. I had a lot of questions from people like, ‘Do those damn things work?’, and I say, ‘Yes, they do actually’. What I am talking about are little windows going up the silo; and even when they are perhaps 6 metres above you, you can see whether the grain has got to that level.

I would say that that sort of thing can save five out of six ascents and descents, just by having windows in the silos. I guest from a silo manufacturer’s point of view they are $25 each, and you cannot have enough of them. That is why in the video we struck for three: one at a low level, because you do not know when a silo is getting close to empty; another one you need to know it is getting full; and one in the middle, because it is an arbitrary sort of thing in between.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Neil, for giving us your time your day and coming to the hearing. You will get a copy of the transcript, and you will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Mr SIMPSON — That will come subsequently?

The CHAIR — In a couple of weeks time.

Witness withdrew.