CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Lakes Entrance–6 April 2004

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Mr D. Liston, general manager, Tambo Logging Company (sworn).
The CHAIR — 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.

Mr LISTON — I am Douglas Graham Liston. I am the general manager of Tambo Logging Company. I represent the Tambo Logging Company. I am not too sure whether I represent the general industry, but this my perspective anyway. I have prepared some notes on my thoughts on OHS at the current time. I have given you a brief background of where we come from.

The CHAIR — Could you summarise that, then we will ask some questions.

Mr LISTON — I have prepared some brief notes. Prior to 1994 logging was done by direct licensee, that being the sawmill which is director owned, and contractors. In those days OHS was pretty loose. In 1994 the Tambo Logging Company was formed, and it worked under contract to the government to organise and harvest and cart timber in the Tambo FMA. Since then we have spread to the north-east FMA. This year we are salvage logging. By world standards I guess the timber industry is, probably second to mining, the most dangerous occupation that people work in. Contractors accept the fact that there are risks and dangers. I must say that the attitudes to OHS in the last few years has changed rapidly because we are working in a dynamic time. We have made significant improvements. Over the last three years we have employed Stem Services, which is a professional organisation formed to handle the implementation and auditing of safety management systems. Basically we joined other syndicates within Victoria. The syndicates involved just about cover most of Victoria. It is to try and establish some consistency and to try and improve OHS in Victoria. We jumped on the bandwagon there.

Tambo Logging Company, and most companies in the state, must have a safety management system before they start work. We do a one-day full-field audit during the year, a half-day audit, and a systems audit. In the notes you will find a brief summary of the contents and what is covered in the audit. Basically our attitude is that our contractors must be aware that they must comply with audits. They either run with it or they do not work in the industry. That is basically where we are at.

Basically we started from scratch three years ago and now, according to our auditors, we are up with the best in the state in complying with OHS. It has been difficult for a lot of the contractors, because a lot of them come from probably not very highly educated backgrounds, but with all due respect to them the majority now expect they have to do it. I must add that they are doing a terrific job. We have made some advances. Safety systems are involved now. As the notes say, it costs about $3000 to fully audit each contractor per year, and that is paid by licensees as part of a levy on sawlogs delivered under the terms of their licences.

Other things have improved over the years, such as communications. All the contractors now have UHF radios which are linked to each other. Each person who works in the bush is interlinked so that they can talk to each other. All our log trucks have them, our vehicles have them and you will probably find that most forest staff in most areas have them. There is much evidence that people want to be safe and look after each other on a coupe basis and going to and from coupes.

There are other little things, like GPS, which helps mark coordinates on coupe plans. We had an accident not long ago which proved that it was good to mark coordinates because we were able to provide longitude and latitude to Helimed 1, so we had no dramas. There was no stress put on the contractor, and we worked together with Helimed 1 and in quick time. There is strict adherence to personal protection equipment these days. A few years ago some wanted to wear it and some did not. Some would say, ‘Who cares?’ Now there is strict adherence to it, and if they do not comply they do not work.

Mr INGRAM — Can you explain exactly the safety equipment, hard hats — —

Mr LISTON — There is basic gear you have to wear. You have to have steel-capped boots and, if you are using your chainsaw, you have chaps, which is just like the cowboys used to wear over their trousers, or safety trousers. That is mandatory. We have had occasions in the past when some are reluctant to wear them because in some ways they are a health hazard.

Mr INGRAM — And vests?

Mr LISTON — Yes, safety vests, hearing protection, visors, hard hats — all that sort of stuff. If you go back a few years ago some were too macho and did not want to wear them. These days we have a lot of
responsibility. The Department of Sustainability and Environment has farmed out supervision of contractors — that is, utilisation, standards, safety, all those, because they think under the WorkSafe regulations or the act we as an employer are responsible. So we have that job now — at a lot more cost, but we have taken that on board in the last couple of years in Tambo.

This year, particularly with the salvage logging, it has been more dangerous because the wood has dried. We have had a few problems with that and we have had a few accidents. It has created a lot more awareness for safety. We have had our auditors come in and we have made new procedures — there is a copy of them in there — like pre-check coupe state. Basically at the moment there are a lot of coupes we will not do by hand now because we consider them too unsafe. Either we have mechanical issues or we call them safe under our guidelines. Forestry has produced a coupe hazard identification sheet, which is in the coupe plan, and we all sign off at the start of the coupe. The contractors have to do a hazard identification. It is not only filling it out and saying, ‘This is the sheet, these are the hazards’. You have to say who is going to be responsible for hazards and who is going to control or eliminate the hazards.

That is at the start of the coupe and under the safety measure system they have to have regular toolbox meetings, where the crew sits down and discusses safety issues. It could be regular or irregular — it could be a smoko, lunchtime or whenever. They sit down and talk about if they have any occupational health and safety issues and then they are documented in their toolbox meetings and diaries — I mean, the whole thing now. We come along probably once a week at the minimum. We have our own pro forma that we have made up, to just do a random check: are they wearing personal protection equipment gear, are they wearing hard hats or is their signage correct and all that sort of stuff.

So the whole emphasis really these days — or it has been in the last few years — is more on safety than it has been on utilisation issues, really. At the moment, as I say, we do our audits. Also we have had visits from WorkSafe in the last couple of years, just to satisfy their own curiosity. We have a good working relationship with WorkSafe — an excellent working relationship with the local people in Traralgon. We are trying to work towards that because we know that as a company we have our obligations. We know that things have changed and there is more and more pressure — I had better not say threats, but there is always that litigation hanging over your head if you are not doing the right thing. The directors of our company push me and the rest of the staff into making sure that everything practical can be done. That is the way the company is going. That is probably it in a nutshell.

What we are trying to do in future improvements — we have come a long way in a few years, but we are increasingly trying to employ more mechanical harvesters. We started off with one about three or four years ago and now we have 12 contractors working for this year for the short term over in the north-east and 8 permanent here. Of our 8, we have 4 with mechanical harvesters now and hopefully by next season we will have 5. The only problem there is that we could probably have more than that, but there is so much long term uncertainty with the resource. That is really what we have hanging over our heads at the moment.

If we had more certainty of resource then we would probably get close to having most people with a mechanical harvester, even though there are limitations with the slope and viability of some of the coupes. It is no secret that the industry is on the slide probably and will go through a period of trying to sort itself out and stabilise, hopefully. That is the biggest issue hanging over us. People go out and buy the mechanical gear, but you are looking at one piece of machinery costing you $500 000 or $600 000. That is a bit of a downfall of the moment. As I say, the attitude has changed immensely. People are working with it and do not have a problem with it. You get a few grizzles now and again, but you get that anywhere.

The only other problem we have encountered is that there are not a lot of new people coming through technical and further education, there are not a lot of new people wanting to work in the industry and there are a lot of people getting older. Probably where the shortfall is in our industry is that when you go to TAFE or something like that — because everyone has to be accredited before they start, anyway — it is probably only a base competency, whereas somewhere in between you need someone out there to teach high, advanced chainsaw skills and come on the job and do it. This has been bashed around with TAFE and other organisations for years, but it has never really got a long way. That is one shortfall. We have tried in the past to get someone who has maybe retired from the industry or just wants to work part time to come around and teach some higher skills to some of the people. At the moment the industry is ageing dramatically, there are not a lot of young ones coming through for different reasons — and safety is probably one of them, or perception of the safety and just the long-term viability of the industry, I suppose. That is probably where we are at.
Mr INGRAM — Doug, one of the issues that has come through, not so much in the Tambo district, but in some of the other harvesting areas, is that the OHS risks have been increased by forcing the industry into marginal coupes, so basically they are forced to work harder to get the returns just because the quality of the timber is not up to sawlog standard and the market for woodchips. That really ties in with some of your resource security comments. Do you want to make some comments on that and what is the impact on the workers on the ground if they are driven into fairly marginal bush?

Mr LISTON — There is the economic viability of it. It is difficult for us where we are because we harvest alpine ash and mountain ash and then we get into the marginal forest types. We have problems there with allocating contractors and trying to be consistent and even in how you treat them in so far as viability and economics go. Down the track it is probably not so much what the bush quality is like — I suppose it is — but at the end of the day it is about how much licensees can pay for it. There is an old story that goes around that it is not so much a crook bush; it is a crook price. At the end of the day it has to balance itself out. It is no secret around East Gippsland or Tambo that a lot of the big species forest is diminishing, the quality is diminishing, and you are going to have to cover more area to get a small amount of volume. It really depends on how Forests Victoria goes in the future. I think there are going to be a lot of dramatic changes come through, probably even the way they allocate coupes.

Mr INGRAM — There are some challenges in the industry in a lot of the areas that have been selectively harvested to go back into those areas to silviculture them. Basically that is what the industry is being expected to do on the coupe rotations. How is that impacting on the viability and therefore the risk to operators in those areas?

Mr LISTON — I do not know if it is so much the risk. I suppose it really comes down to the economics of the department. This is what it has come down to right now, as to how viable are some of these two coupes to log silviculturally — where you get X amount of wood off it, how much it costs to regenerate it. I do not know that this is a safety issue; I think it comes down to where the industry is going, really. We are probably lucky in that in some instances we can log for nearly 12 months of the year, but it is coming to a grind around Bairnsdale shortly, that we will not be able to log through winter, or very little. Therefore it really will impact on people. They will not be able to work for 12 months of the year. I do not think that safety-wise it is an issue.

The only way you can really do it viably probably is to use a mechanical harvester. The days of doing by hand some of these low-volume or low-economic coupes are probably gone now because it is too slow. It is like East Gippsland. You have to move vast more areas to get product off it. I do not think it snowballs that much, but a lot of people argue that because they do not get paid much for some products, then they have to work harder and longer and all this sort of stuff. But I do not really buy it as an OHS issue really.

Dr NAPTHINE — In some parts of Victoria there are arguments about the merits of clear-felling versus selective logging. Purely in terms of occupational health and safety, do you have a view about clear-felling versus selective logging for people working in those coupes?

Mr LISTON — We have never done selective logging, but I guess they both probably have got hazards. In clear-felling it means your are going to fell all the trees, apart from some habitat or retained trees. That means you have to start up at what you call a face and work into an open area so that as the trees fall down you work backwards so you are not falling into each other. In itself that has hazards because basically you have to fell every tree unless it is designated by the farmer that it has got to stay. But even with selective falling there would be an element of risk as well because if you are only selectively logging the trees and the other one has got to stay it is harder to get around as well. It is the same as when you have got to work around habitat and seed trees or any other retained trees: they have got to stay there under the code and the timber and harvesting regulations; you are not allowed to damage them, or minimally damage them, therefore you have to use wedges. When you start using wedges and start to fell trees, then you start getting the risks.

Mr INGRAM — There is one issue that has been put forward, particularly in relation to clear-felling. We have seen a lot of the clear-felling of mixed-age regrowth in some areas, probably more so in East Gippsland and Tambo again. One of the suggestions we have put forward is using some of the new age of thinning-type equipment, your mechanical harvesters, to leave the younger regrowth and take out some of the older more mature trees. Do you see that as a future way of doing some of the selective logging in some of those areas, a bit like the thinnings with larger trees? What are the limitations of it?
Mr LISTON — Absolutely. I really think that even if you talk to our contractors and the industry in general that the days of hand-felling are limited. Unfortunately you cannot do it without it 100 per cent, but today, economically or not, mechanical harvesting is the only way to go, and that is what will happen in the future. Our crews will get smaller, and hopefully we can manufacture ways of people staying in the industry with mechanical gear. With mechanical gear you can move faster, and it is a lot easier on the crew because they can sit in a machine all day and they do not get mentally tired. It is different if you are doing it by hand; you get exhausted. It really is the way the softwood industry is, and I do not see any reason why the hardwood industry is not going to go the same way.

Mr INGRAM — How important is the backup of Helimed and your radio communications, and how does that improve the survival chances of someone who has a serious accident in the bush?

Mr LISTON — It is absolute. Helimed 1 to us, you just cannot do without it. Technology has helped a lot, I suppose. We have trunk radios in vehicles, which forestry workers also have as do most of the contractors. We can use them as telephones or on the conventional trunk system. You have got mobile phones and UHF radios. Now there is no excuse where we work to have no communications. Basically no contractor works for us — I do not think you would find anyone — who has not got a communication system in place whereby they can talk to someone and have a designated meeting point if there is an accident and locations where Helimed is able to land. Touch wood, we have used Helimed once this year. There was a fractured skull in December, but prior to that not we have not had a severe head injury since 1995, I think. Knowing it is there is the important thing.

Dr NAPTHINE — We were advised of the Eden logging investigation and training team, known as ELITT. Do you know about it?

Mr LISTON — It is an organisation that operates out of Eden. I am not too sure who finances it. I think it is financed the same as us — that is, through levies paid by licensees. It is a training organisation. I am not too sure of its standing, but I think it is pretty good. It is probably on a smaller scale to TAFE, only a very small scale.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for finding the time to come today and for all the effort you have put into your submission. You will get a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.