RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Seymour – 14 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 S. Thomson, member, Glenaroua land management group (sworn); and
Ms N. Hiscock, president, Kilmore branch, and secretary, Hume district council, Victorian Farmers Federation.
The CHAIR — Welcome, Sarah Thomson and Nancy Hiscock. Would you give your full names and addresses and, if you are representing an organisation, your position within that organisation, for the purposes of the transcript?


Ms HISCOCK — My full name is Nancy Elizabeth Hiscock, ‘Moorlands’, Willowmavin via Kilmore. I am president of the Kilmore branch of the VFF and also secretary of the Hume district council of the VFF.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. If you do not mind now giving us a brief presentation, we might have some questions for you following that.

Ms THOMSON — Yes, thank you. I am not quite as prepared as perhaps I should have been; I thought I would be bobbing up from the floor.

I am responding to this survey as a partner in a professional farming operation. Our farming activities provide our major source of income. We employ an overseer and station hand, and both are full-time positions; plus we employ six shearers and the shedhands to service them at shearing time. We would like clarification as to what is ‘a farm’ or ‘a farmer’. We note that the executive summary of the report states, ‘The majority of farmers surveyed indicated farming was not their only source of income’. Does this mean that the majority of the 77 respondents to the survey are hobby farmers who are not reliant on their farm for their financial survival? We believe that our geographic location — that is, within an hour of the outer Melbourne suburbs and on the Hume Freeway corridor means that we are likely to attract city dwellers who often have a warm and fuzzy view of farming. Are other shires within a similar radius of Melbourne also experiencing an increase in farm injuries? Subdivision of farming land very close to Melbourne means that many people without farming experience buy farms believing that any mug can farm. The problem is that there are now too many mugs farming. Perhaps I should give a few examples.

Is a farmer a neighbour who has farmed 6000 acres all his life and now runs it with his 30-year-old son who has also been there all his life? Or is a farmer a neighbour who has 120 acres, no experience of farming and runs his farm with his wife and daughters? He bought the farm at Glenaroua believing that by growing paulownias on his 120 acres he would become a millionaire. That enterprise failed. He then decided on cattle and invested in some very wild cattle, and he manages them without any proper cattle yards. Or is a farmer a neighbour who also has about 120 acres where he grows olives? While planting the olives he and a friend were under the influence of some funny cigarettes and whiskey. They were using a back hoe to help dig the holes. It started to roll backwards towards the friend, so our neighbour put his leg out to stop the tractor. His injuries were quite substantial. Unfortunately too few people understand that a farm is a workplace, and a very dangerous workplace.

We are concerned that professional farmers are being maligned because the questionnaire does not separate us from recreational farmers. We think the figures should be further analysed as to how many hours of machinery operation per injury or the number of stock handled per injury. We are not saying that we do not have injuries on our farms, but we handle thousands of sheep and cannot remember the last injury sustained while handling them. Professional farmers generally have a safe workplace to conduct animal handling. Too often we see recreational farmers handling stock in yards constructed from a couple of gates tied with string. Chainsaws are a very dangerous piece of equipment, but they can be bought and used by anyone without proper safety equipment and training. For us motorbikes are a tool and not a recreational vehicle. We still have accidents on them but are the majority of injuries which are included in the figures sustained while farming or while having fun hooning around the paddock? Professional farmers see too many recreational farmers not complying with occupational health and safety rules. This includes tractors without ROPS, spark arresters or machinery such as knapsacks on tractors. Should there be a requirement that purchasers of blocks must attend farm safety, animal husbandry, machinery operation, environmental and chemical users courses? WorkCover contributions are an expensive part of our farming budget. They cost about $8000 last year.

Is the committee aware that only farmers with wages bills over $7000 are required to contribute? Therefore many recreational farmers are being subsidised by professional farmers. Lisa mentioned the young chap working with cattle. His dental work cost $22 000, and WorkCover paid for it. He was not part of an operation that paid a WorkCover premium, so that is just one instance of it.
Unless the farm safety issue is addressed properly it could become a divisive issue within communities. Our community has been proactive in including newcomers in our organisations and activities, but there is resentment surfacing from some farmers towards recreational farmers due to their farming practices. These include safety, animal health and duty-of-care issues. We applaud Mitchell Community Health Services for conducting the survey as we are aware that a farm is a dangerous place, particularly when mistaken for a fun park. We agree that we need to increase awareness as to the dangers involved in farming and educate people in the proper handling and use of farm equipment.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Do you think it is possible that some of those surveys that were answered were from farmers who may have a partner or spouse who works off the farm? They could have a job as a teacher, work in a shop or something like that as well.

**Ms THOMSON** — I do not know that, but it is interesting that the majority were not reliant on the farm for their survival, so perhaps their full attention was not — — I cannot answer that, and that is one of the questions that I am asking.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Of the people you know around your area, are a lot husband-and-wife teams where the farmer works the farm during the day and the wife maybe works at one of the local schools or in a shop?

**Ms THOMSON** — Yes, I am sure there is that situation, but I do not think we should see that as an excuse. I think farmers are generally more careful and aware of the dangers of handling equipment. We will not use a four-wheeled motorbike on our farm because it is just too dangerous, but we see people using them and believing they are just a fun tool for hooning around on. It is too easy to access that sort of thing without proper understanding of the use, and that goes for chainsaws as well.

**Mr INGRAM** — You did touch on the definition of farm, it being a working farm. I would like you to tell the committee what your definition of a working farm is, considering that some of us have come from farm backgrounds and because it is something that comes up pretty regularly. There is a debate here between two presentations. What is your definition of a working farm?

**Ms THOMSON** — One that is run as a business. It is run as a professional operation. Those involved are proactive in trying to lift productivity and improve the farm in all ways, environmentally and productivity wise. Also a proper working farm would probably produce the major source of income. We could not farm if we could not derive any income from it. That is what we do; that is our business.

**Mr McQUIL TEN** — To make a profit?

**Ms THOMSON** — Yes.

**Ms HISCOCK** — There is none.

**Mr McQUIL TEN** — That is the point. You have not mentioned that at all, and I would have thought that that is an important part of any business, and you are claiming all these other people are in business like you.

**Ms THOMSON** — I said it is a business, so how many businesses do you know —

**Mr McQUIL TEN** — A lot of farming businesses make losses.

**Ms THOMSON** — Yes, but how many businesses do you know that aim not to make a profit? Their aim is to make a profit.

**Mr McQUIL TEN** — Quite a few, actually. If you are in business it is to minimise tax, is it not?

**Ms THOMSON** — No.

**Mr McQUIL TEN** — Is it not? Okay. I thought I had heard the Prime Minister say that.

**Ms THOMSON** — I would consider that for us to run a business and not aim to make a profit is a ridiculous statement. We have not made much in the way of profit in the last few years when we consider the seasons. We have had 12 millimetres of rain since the beginning of this year, so that puts added pressure on people.
That might be some indicator as to why there has been an increase because the seasons have been so dreadful, so I think perhaps that is something else that should be looked at. But our farm is run as a business and we aim to make a profit, but we also aim to improve the farm. We are in an area that has huge salinity problems and we spend a lot of time, money and effort trying to address that problem as well. It is not just all about profit; it is also about improving our land. We are only lent this land, really. We would like to pass it on to the next generation in a better state than it currently is.

Dr NAPTHINE — Sarah, you mentioned people who come to rural areas who perhaps do not have the background and expertise, and you talked about chainsaws and things like that. Do you think there should be some rules or requirements about the sale of chainsaws? If you want to go in and purchase a firearm there are certain rules, but if you want to go in and buy a chainsaw, you can do so off the street, and the biggest chainsaw in the shop without any rules or requirements for the person selling them even to ask when you have had experience or whether you should be required to go to some sort of training. Do you think those sorts of things ought to be put in place.

Ms THOMSON — I do. I know chainsaws are a particularly dangerous piece of equipment. I was given one for Mother’s Day one year, and the only reason I was able to operate it well was because my husband had attended a chainsaw safety course. I think it was part of a Country Fire Authority thing. It is the most wonderful piece of equipment I have ever had.

Dr NAPTHINE — It is a trusting husband who gives his wife a chainsaw!

Ms THOMSON — It was, yes. It is going to come back to bite him! But I do understand the danger of them, and also whipper snippers with metal blades. They are such a dangerous piece of equipment, and people think they can just pick them up and use them without any experience. Perhaps the figures on the felling of trees are evidence. My husband has seen that on a number of occasions — people felling trees in the wrong way.

Mr INGRAM — There has been a fair bit of discussion about regulation and about farmers being reluctant to accept the imposition of regulation or legislation. If you look back at the ROPS-on-tractors program, that was widely considered as a successful program, and that came with a regulation that said, ‘You are required to have rollover protection’. This sort of program obviously requires a process of educating right through to eventually regulating to make sure farmers comply. Do you believe there is a place for regulation when there is a clearly identifiable outcome that needs action even if there is a reluctance by some to accept it?

Ms THOMSON — Is this in regard to chainsaws or everything?

Mr INGRAM — In general. We could use a whole range of examples, but I would like to stick to one, like the regulation for ROPS. If we could identify a clear safety device that was necessary to improve safety on a particular object and if there was a reluctant voluntary take-up, is there a role for regulation in that situation?

Ms THOMSON — I think there is a role for some regulation, and that is why I said that when people buy blocks perhaps there should be some regulation that says they have to attend a course in farm safety; in equipment handling and all that sort of thing; in stock health, too, which is another thing that offends farmers; and in weed control, which is one of our Landcare group’s major problems. Paterson’s curse is proliferating in the district, and it has never been here before. There is a duty of care, and we find it very hard to watch that and see it happen. I agree that the introduction of ROPS was a brilliant initiative, but there are still people not using them. How many times do you see on TV a tractor without one?

Ms HISCOCK — Even locally you can drive around and find half a dozen examples of tractors without rollover protection.

Mr INGRAM — Recently there was a case in Queensland of a jackaroo involving the issue of wearing a helmet on a horse. As an employer you pay WorkCover and you have a duty to provide a safe working place for your employees. There is a reluctance in some farming quarters to recognise that that duty of care is there, particularly with things like providing helmets for riders on agbikes and providing courses in handling chainsaws. In most other areas where chainsaws are used regularly you would not have anyone who had not done a chainsaw safety course. There still seems to be a reluctance to take that up in some farming quarters. How do we get that message through, considering there has been an enormous amount of education which seems to be reaching only a small number of producers?
Ms THOMSON — I know it is difficult. We have an overseer who finds it very hard to wear a motorbike helmet, and we have battled long, loud and often with him to get him to wear it. I think you just have to keep on being a squeaky wheel. Perhaps legislation is a way to make people comply, the same as with the ROPS.

Dr NAPTHINE — We heard evidence earlier about farmers in this area being a bit concerned about the imposition of the 2-metre rule and feeling they were not properly consulted. Can I ask, first, did you have any consultation on this at VFF level? Did your local members bring it to your attention prior to its coming in?

Ms HISCOCK — Only that I know the VFF is still opposing it and trying to get an exemption from that rule for farmers, because there are so many examples of situations around a farm where it is just impractical to have some sort of safety equipment. As a prime example, we were shearing the other day, and we have a ramp coming out the side of the shed where we unload the wool off onto the trucks. That ramp is 2 metres above the ground. How do you put safety equipment around a ramp when you actually have to roll the wool off the ramp to put it on the truck? It would be a logistical nightmare. The end result of those sorts of regulations is that you get family members to do those jobs, because you cannot afford to have an employee do them.

Dr NAPTHINE — As practical farmers and as people involved in the VFF, how would you suggest we improve farm safety with respect to falls, without going down a blanket regulatory route?

Ms HISCOCK — It would seem to me that putting a blanket regulation on the whole of industry — all industry, not just segregating the industries into various sections — seems a very harsh way of dealing with those sorts of rules, because every workplace is different. Every workplace has its own unique set of situations to deal with on a daily basis, so industry-wise those sorts of regulations should be looked at on an industry basis rather than having a blanket rule for the whole of industry.

Ms THOMSON — Education is a major thing. I know that in Denmark you cannot farm unless you have been to agricultural college, so new ways are being brought into agriculture all the time. They are keeping up to date, but obviously they are also trained in farm safety. I am not suggesting we do that here, but we have to stop talking agriculture down to the younger generation. Too many of my generation have talked agriculture down to their children because they view the farm as their superannuation, and then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy — the children do not want to farm because they have never been encouraged to farm, so they do not see it as a worthy career. If we can start talking up agriculture, we will hopefully get some better outcomes and better educated people farming, and hopefully that information about safety will then spread through the community.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you think the farm is a safer place now than it was 10 or 20 years ago?

Ms HISCOCK — Yes.

Ms THOMSON — Yes. Nancy mentioned doing jobs you will not ask other people to do. We have OJD, and the Gudair vaccine is a dangerous vaccine. My husband did that vaccination himself. He was not prepared to ask any employees to administer that, because it is dangerous and we were frightened of the repercussions, and also because we want to look after them. But it is a very tough balancing act.

Dr NAPTHINE — I would agree with you that it is a safer place now, and we have to pat ourselves on the back for that and then look to the future.

Ms THOMSON — But it seems that in Mitchell shire it is not safer. Are the figures much the same in other shires within a similar radius of Melbourne and with a similar amount of subdivision; that is what I ask.

The CHAIR — I was interested in your comment about animal handling, especially on the smaller farms. A lot of people dream about buying a few acres and putting a few head of cattle on there. You were talking about cattle yards and the importance of safety. I would like to hear a bit more about that. For example, if people are going to put more than one cow on their property, should there be regulations about what kind of equipment you have to manage that situation, or is that getting a bit too harsh?

Ms THOMSON — I think it is probably getting too harsh. But the neighbour I mentioned who had the paulownias and the wild cattle, he lost one of those beasts the other day. A cartage contractor went to try to load it to take to Bendigo to sell it, and they could not get it on the truck — it charged everyone — and we were told to shoot if it we saw it. No-one was to go near it — a great horned beast — but it was roaming, and no-one knew
where it was. There has to be a duty of care to look after stock; that is a safety issue as well. People were not prepared to go into the paddock to shoot it; they had to be in adjoining paddock. They thought they were a bit safer in a vehicle — that is how dangerous it is.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time and your concise and succinct submission. It was great.

Ms THOMSON — Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — You will get a copy of the transcript, and you can correct matters of grammar or fact but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.