CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

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Witness

Mr F. Vaia, farmer.
Mr VAIA — Frank Vaia, 4 Jennifer Place, Wangaratta. It is interesting to be here. I am a farmer. I exited the industry last year. My reason for coming here today is to see and hear. I have a big interest in Farmsafe now, and always have, and I was interested to see how few farmers turned up for something like this. With the topics that the ladies and gentlemen have brought up, they are very serious ones. Just to touch on a couple, Craig, you mentioned how can you get this interaction between your programs and the farmers. You mentioned one person could come around on a regular basis. I would strongly suggest that WorkSafe have a vehicle with ‘WorkSafe’ advertised on it, therefore making it easily identifiable as a community service aid.

Farmers tend to get a little bit embarrassed or tend to sort of be a bit too proud, and it would help if they had a WorkSafe vehicle with some of the up-to-date WorkSafe products in it, a bit like a sales representative’s car, turning up maybe once a month, or however many people or farms they are attending to, to promote this as a friendly visit. Farmers are a little bit touchy on that. I come from the tobacco industry, and there are a lot of Europeans. Some of them are hard to speak English with. Their sons are thrown into the farm in their late teens or early 20s because jobs are hard to find outside, so they decide to take on the farm as a second option. In the tobacco industry I have never seen a safety officer turn up on a farm, and I have been doing it for 20 years. I have never seen any programs mentioned — never heard of them, still did not know they existed, until today. That is why I am interested to see what is available and what is there. There is nothing happening in the tobacco and dairy industries up in the Kiewa Valley that I know of anyway, even to this day. I have never seen a WorkSafe car with a representative visiting any farm up in the Ovens Valley to this day. If they are there, they are not visible. Nobody can see them.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Frank. You are touching on an issue that is very widespread in sense of even the people who run the farm safety program tell us they are getting the same people each time and the people you think would typically turn up are the ones who are coming along. We are not getting the whole of the community; we are getting the ones who often do know about the programs and do know about things. So finding a way to reach other people who are not that connected with things that are going on is the big difficulty, I think.

Mr VAIA — If you see a vehicle going up the road calling into farms it is a bit like a rep. — well it is, really, and it would not be intimidating or anything like that. I would strongly think that something like that is needed. Just another point before I stop. When it comes to machinery on farms, we handle a lot of machinery and a lot of employees with tobacco. Just a simple thing like keeping water in tyres is a major thing that is neglected on a farm. If you get a flat back tyre, you ring up and get someone to come and fix it, I will guarantee you 80 per cent of the time water does not go back into that tube. What happens eventually — well, the first case is going to be you are going to have water in the tube on one side of the tractor and air in the other and the balance will just be out of whack. Then the next time that you get a flat tyre there is a good chance that it will be the one with water in it so you will end up with two back tyres with no water in them. If you try to drive one of those down the road or around with a bit of weight in it, it is like a basketball. There are a lot of tractors out there that that has happened to. It is not very often that I have seen a repairman put water back into a tyre after fixing it. Just things like that are unregulated — handbrakes, just standard things — which would be something to regulate with, say, a WorkSafe car that went around.

The representative does a few different things on that farm, and you develop a relationship. You can go as far as your suicide scenarios. When you get a relationship happening between yourself and the farmer, you just ask a few indirect questions to get an idea of how that farmer is coping with things and so forth and you can introduce certain programs which are in the third page of his folder or so forth. It is a good way to keep up to date with what the farmer is doing in a lot of different areas, just by asking a few simple questions. Could be as simple as saying, ‘Had any close calls this month?’. They might give you an example where something was close but did not happen. Then the farmer might not realise that one tyre does not have water in it and one has, and that could be the reason. If the farmer describes the scenario to the representative, even though nothing happened, it could be that the safety officer could figure it out and come up with a probable reason why it was a close accident. You can start uncovering a lot of WorkSafe stuff happening on farms.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that, Frank. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks time and you will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Committee adjourned.