CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Kerang – 23 March 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield  Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman  Dr D. V. Napthine
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Witness

Mr G. Kendell, Eastern Mallee District Council, Victorian Farmers Federation (sworn).
The CHAIR — 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’s hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

This is an all-party parliamentary committee that includes members from the Liberal and National parties and an Independent member.

I invite you to give your full name and address for the purposes of the transcript.

Mr KENDELL — My full name is Geoffrey Thomas Kendell, 1195 Quambatook Road, Kerang, 3975, Victoria.

The CHAIR — I invite you to make some brief opening comments.

Mr KENDELL — I have a brief submission for this inquiry into fatalities and injuries on Victorian farms. The reasons why farm accidents and deaths are occurring at an increasing rate are because of the present economics of farming. Farmers have to work harder and longer than they ever did before for less return. They cannot afford the on-farm labour that they badly need, so many wives are helping out when they can. Many of the wives have taken on full-time or part-time employment to help rein in diminishing farm returns, then come home to do all the extra piles of work related to the GST. I also note that they do quite a lot on the farm to help out as well.

Due to the present economics of farming many repair jobs are left undone; machinery is becoming old and fatigued, along with the farmers. This is why we are having more accidents.

Shortcuts are being taken to get through the bulk of the work at a faster rate, and eventually something has to give. Poor monetary returns for a lot more hours worked at higher speed, coupled with the non-affordability of labour and general fatigue of the farmer and his equipment, are causing this major problem.

You may be seeing an escalation in our region, after eight years of dry and drought conditions, being noted as the worst affected area in the state of Victoria. I know that we are the only employment sector that lives in its workplace, but it seems the accidents are mainly occurring during work, and when something happens the community really feels it extremely hard.

The RIPPER — rural injury prevention primary education resource — program has been a good program for the children involved, and maybe a few more adults need to be involved with the kids.

In the grains industry we are seeing the same gross returns as 40 years ago, but expenses have gone through the roof, now doubling on average every four to five years.

A one-and-a-half day strategic plan for the grains industry, to be released during Grains Week in Perth at the end of this month, shows a decrease in the number of growers from 40 000 to 29 000 by 2020; and if government and marketing are not smart during these next few years we could hit critical mass of 12 000 by 2020. These findings will only escalate the present problems as we go harder and faster to try to survive as margins decrease by half every four to five years.

I do not believe extra legislation or more paperwork is the way to go. In fact, this causes more jobs for the farmer to do and gives them less time to be outside actually running the farm. This added stress and pressure is helping no-one except for the people in the department who retain their jobs shuffling or recycling our paper. This major problem is quite complex, and there is not a simple solution. Paperwork will not solve the problem.

Mr McQUILTEN — Do you have any answers? In your submission there are many complaints about what is, but what about what could be? We are actually talking about farmers lives and the lives of their kids and people who visit farms. There is a lot at stake. Complaining to everybody else and the rest of the world is fine, but that will not fix the problem.
Mr KENDELL — The RIPPER program is a program that we run for children in schools. It shows them a lot of the problems that are associated on farm.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Who is ‘we’? Do you mean the VFF?

Mr KENDELL — Yes, the VFF and also the Farmsafe Alliance, people like the Northern District Health Service and so on. The Victorian Farmers Federation Industrial Association works in those types of fields on the side as well. It is mainly through the Farmsafe Alliance. It is a good little program. I was involved in one of the days that were organised, and I got quite a lot out of it as an adult. I think maybe some of the farmers, or adults, should be there with the kids, because certainly the kids get a really good take-home message. It is a program that runs not only on a field day or field outing; it also runs as a course in schools for four to six weeks doing the actual program. It is quite a good one.

To come back to the farmer side of things, we have a huge problem with diminishing returns and not only being able to physically get out. And if we are able to do things physically, we are not able to financially pay for the repairs or the upgrades. We certainly have come through a fairly rough period of time financially. The majority of us farmers can see the things that actually need doing around our farms to bring things into a safe sort of environment, but it is a combination of fatigue — having to work for so long — and I do not know how you get around it. As I said, it is quite a complex problem.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about discounts on insurance premiums for farmers if they met a certain compliance standard? Would that act as a financial incentive for farmers to perhaps improve things?

Mr KENDELL — It probably would. It is probably a financial incentive, but it is still the actual burden; I think the lot of us believe a major factor is the speed of living nowadays. It has just got faster and faster, and it is becoming more difficult for us to keep up with the economics and the loads of paperwork. The loads of paperwork are really hurting — you seem to be spending more time in the office and less time on farm, and when you get out on the farm you go faster and faster and longer and longer to try to make up the time you have physically been in the office doing the loads of paperwork that we have to do nowadays. We have actually gone from being farmers to being businesspeople. That is the world we live in now.

Dr NAPTHINE — Many farmers and the VFF believe that the rollover protection structure (ROPS) program has been very successful.

Mr KENDELL — Yes.

Dr NAPTHINE — What is your view as a dryland farmer on installing safety access platforms based on the rollover protection program model?

Mr KENDELL — Certainly they would be helpful if there was an incentive towards power takeoffs or towards covers on the augers or ways of getting around problems with open augers, open PTO shafts and so on. There has to be some means to financially help farmers put those on, because there are a lot of them. Individuals have so many different pieces of equipment like that on their farms that cause those particular problems. Then there are silos. Certainly nowadays there is an opportunity on older unsealed silos to actually physically lift the lid on top of the silo from the ground, but then there is another cost in putting that particular piece of equipment on the silos to do that.

But we would still have a problem with sealed silos. With the O-ring in the top of a sealed silo you physically have to climb to the top of the silo to replace the O-ring every 12 months. There is a whole host, a number of different bits and pieces all the way down the chain for everything we do. There are so many different jobs that we do per year and so much different machinery that we use all the time.

The CHAIR — Apparently the farm safety audit is happening in the area. What has the take-up been for local farmers?

Mr KENDELL — The one that the shire and Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE have been involved with has been very good. Certainly the farmers are quite keen to get out and see what is there. On top of that the Worksafe video done with Neil Simpson, a grain grower from Berriwillock, has been very good, because it has
shown farmers how, for not much cost, they can make their machinery safer and how they can make what they do a lot safer and easier.

The CHAIR — Is it getting to the farmers who may not be connected through the VFF and/or other organisations? Are the people out there connecting to that sort of program?

Mr KENDELL — I believe slowly, very slowly. It is a thing that will take time to get through. It is like the rollover protection. The uptake was minimal initially, but by the end it was rolling quite quickly, and a lot of people were taking it up. It takes a period of time over two or three years to get through the community.

The CHAIR — Do you have any suggestions for getting it through to the community, especially to those people who are not connected through the different organisations?

Mr KENDELL — It is hard, I suppose. As a local branch of the VFF we have 180 members. UDV certainly has a large membership here also. It seems to get out by word of mouth. Field days are good, as are local papers. Television is the other medium; a lot of people watch late at night.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is there a council newsletter?

Mr KENDELL — There is a column in the paper, but I do not know if there is a council newsletter. I cannot help you there, Michael.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time today. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You will be able to make corrections to matters of fact or grammar, but not to matters of substance.

Mr KENDELL — I hope you can come up with some answers.

Witness withdrew.