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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Witnesses
Ms J. Tucker, coordinator (sworn); and
Ms A. Howe, committee member (sworn), Wellington Farm Safety Action Group.
The CHAIR — Welcome. Under powers conferred 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 that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

For the purposes of the transcript, please state your full names and addresses. If you represent an organisation, please state the name of the organisation and the positions you hold within that organisation.

Ms TUCKER — My name is Jill Marianne Tucker, and my address is RMB 2070, Stockdale. I represent the Wellington farm safety action group of which I am the coordinator.

Ms HOWE — My name is Alison Maree Howe, 4 Teal Court, Glenmaggie. I represent the Wellington farm safety action group as a committee member.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Obviously we have your submission here, so could you please give us some brief comments, and then we will ask some questions. I appreciate your attendance at previous hearings.

Ms TUCKER — You are a lot closer here than you were down in Melbourne, are you not?

Mr WALSH — Is that good or bad?

Ms TUCKER — Have you read our submission? I was beginning to wonder this afternoon just how many things you have read since we saw you last?

The CHAIR — Lots!

Ms TUCKER — I thought you might have! There is probably not a lot about farm safety that you have not heard. You have read our submission, so no doubt you are aware that the Wellington farm safety action group is the most active and successful farm safety action group in of the 35 or 36 that operate in Victoria. We are very proud of our group of excellent people, but it did not come about like a bingo draw. The projects we have developed and delivered, and the work contributed by our people, can be seen on the last three pages. We made a brief run-down of the things we have done. No other farm safety group has accomplished what we have, simply because they do not have the fundamental element required to achieve the sort of status as no. 1 group that we have, and of course that element is money.

Going back a bit, in 1996 I attended a conference in Echuca; I think it was run by the division of general practice. I was fortunate enough there to meet Eric Young. You have probably heard Eric’s name come up a number of times.

Mr MITCHELL — A very nice chap.

Ms TUCKER — When people say there are big boots to fill, that is in spades as far as Eric is concerned. He was a terrific man and he took a genuine interest in our embryonic steps into farm safety. He came down to Sale and guided us towards getting a submission into the Victorian WorkCover Authority, which it was then. It was not called WorkSafe Victoria then. He managed to get us $8000 and we thought we were made. We got a little bit of money from the Wellington shire and from adult education. With this bit of money we started to make a few tentative inroads into reducing death and injury on Victorian farms.

In 1997 I put together a submission to the commonwealth primary industries department, through its rural communities program. I asked for $30 000 thinking that I might get $12 000, so I thought I would try. I thought our application was quite good, but I did not get $30 000. They gave us $107 000. With that we were able to do all of the things you can see in the back of our submission. Obviously we accomplished some pretty good things because we had money. We had funding for three years, but of course it has run out now. Anyway, we developed credibility which enabled us to put in submissions further to WorkSafe Victoria, the Australian Workers Union and the Department of Human Services. They have given us the funding to run programs for safe tractor access platforms (STAPs); roll-over protective structures (ROPS); safety switches in shearing sheds; and the new back harnesses that Sam Beechey has had a fair bit to do with putting together. We also have our big primary school field days for farm safety throughout the Wellington shire. I think we have 33 schools in the shire and 1200 kids, and that has
been one of our bigger projects. We have got to that stage because we have been able to have some sort of credibility.

That is where we are at now. That is giving you some idea of where we have come from, but you have to go back to the first page of our submission where the three little arrows go in. The factor that impacts on our continued success and the endeavours we want to put forward is money.

Whilst we acknowledge the importance of sound research, unless it results in some sorts of strategies that can be delivered to the practising farmers, then it is just another gathering of data. I believe the Wellington farm safety action group has the ability, the credibility and the networks to deliver strategies. We do not profess to be researchers and come up particularly with all these engineering strategies, which a lot of people in WorkSafe Victoria seem to think they will fix problems through. I cannot argue with that, but we have the ability to deliver those to the grassroots farmers in a manner that they will accept without resentment. Farmers resent government intervention. They do not like the sight of red-plate cars, and they certainly do not like words like ‘WorkSafe’ because they all think that is going to hit them in the pocket, so they get a bit nervous.

I think we have developed to the point where we can go to into the smaller communities. Craig, you were at one of the ones we ran at Gelantipy. We have another one at Tubbut fairly soon. We go along with all the players we have in our network relating to farm safety and we will talk about issues such as the one that has come up right now — that is, the fall from heights. We have already a couple of little plans in our minds of how we might sell this to farmers in an acceptable, friendly way. However, you can have all the greatest ideas in the world, but you do not achieve them unless you have got money. That is what I guess our submission is about. If this committee is able to direct or influence in any way the WorkCover authority to look at putting money out to organisations like ours, to help us get it down to the farmers who are practising and doing the work day to day, it is not much good if it just stays up in the hierarchy and does not get back down to the farmers. I dare say everybody mentions money, but I cannot help it. That is what it is all about: money.

Ms Howe — You are probably not aware that Jill’s position is only funded one day a week, and that is why we are asking for money. It is not as if we are asking for heaps, but if we could stretch it to two days or even three, we could do wonders with that.

I have two questions. It would be really interesting if you had some comments from Minister Cameron, who was the previous minister responsible for WorkSafe. Was he invited to present? He would have a lot of information, I thought. The other thing I want to know is whether there are any figures from WorkSafe that tell us whether they are actually proactive or reactive; and is a lot of money is being spent on just administering the claim process rather than looking at preventive measures to see that scenario of how the money is spent, whether that percentage could be altered. If we could get it more down to the grassroots networks that would probably go a long way. I guess that is what we are asking for — more funding for something like Jill’s position throughout Victoria, because there are only four?

Ms Tucker — There are four regional Farmsafe Alliance safety officers. We work, obviously, with David Phillips. Actually I think there are only two of us at the moment. David Phillips held the position in Colac, and it has not been filled. There is somebody missing in the north-east of Victoria — there is no farm safety person like me. I do not like to say ‘like me’, but the Wellington farm safety action group operates well because we have people like Alison and all the other people who come in to the organisation, to our meetings, and put in to help us do things. They can be other people simply like those at ABC radio who support us all the time. That is a good way of getting the message out and encouraging people to participate. You just have to get rid of this angst that farmers have about regulations and get them to see that safety on the farm is in their own, their family’s and their workers’ interests.

Dr Naphthine — Jill, can I ask the very tough question, I suppose? What you have described is a lot of very meritorious activity and I do not think anybody would argue that on the surface it looks very commendable, and I am sure it is. What evidence have you got that it has actually made a difference?

Ms Tucker — It is a hard question. It is also the question that we have had right from the beginning. I find it difficult to be able to say. Because we have put that good safe step on that tractor today, have I saved Fred Bloggs from slipping under it tomorrow morning with his muddy boots on the wet ground? How do I know? I do not. Legislation helps the ROPS thing because you have to. The STAPs project is: it’s a good idea, please
participate. It is the same with the safety switches. I used to be a schoolteacher so I do believe education has to start fairly young. I hope that if we can continue to do these primary school events that kids will develop an ethos about safety, not only on the farm but about themselves. I do not know. It is a difficult thing for me to answer. People like Lesley Day, who deal in those sorts of things, probably know better than I do. I know there is an issue, and I am doing the best I can.

Dr NAPTHINE — It is a difficult question because you cannot say at this stage. I suppose it is frustrating to all of us who are committed to improving farm safety that it seems this year we have had a terrible start to the year.

Ms TUCKER — We have.

Dr NAPTHINE — Yet seemingly we all think we have been making some good progress. This year we have had the death at Orbost, the death at Simpson, we had a child drown the other day, and we just sort of think —

Ms TUCKER — Aren’t you listening?

Dr NAPTHINE — Yes. Are we making a difference or not?

Ms HOWE — I guess you only find that out if you stopped doing anything and then measure it. That would be disastrous. What is the cost of doing nothing?

Mr WALSH — But if you did get the money you are talking about, how many years do you think it would take to see a difference in the statistics?

Ms HOWE — Like Jill said, if you can get to the children young and develop that ethos like we have with seatbelts — I mean, a child does not get into a car now without a seatbelt on — then it will come. If you do not start it, it is never going to come. So, how long is a piece of string? What would be a good answer? If you want to hear 10 years, I will say 10, but I think it is more likely to be 20 or 25. It will be a generational thing, but if you do not start with that generation now it is not going to happen in 20 or 25 years. What if we had never started off with seatbelts? Someone has to be brave enough to take that leadership role and just commit. History will tell us whether it was right or wrong, whether it was money well spent, but that is why I asked that question: how much money is being spent on administration just to process claims? Then compare that to what is being spent on preventive programs or even just education, to see whether you are proactive or reactive.

Mr WALSH — So how many groups would we need across Victoria?

Ms HOWE — As long as the groups are active, I do not think it matters how many numbers.

Mr WALSH — It does matter, because you have a large geographic area to cover. If we came out with a recommendation that we should fund groups for three days a week, for argument’s sake, how many groups days is that?

Ms HOWE — Divide it up into the Department of Primary Industries regions.

Ms TUCKER — There are 35 or 36 farm safety action groups but they are not all in the sort of position that we are in. For example, we work under the umbrella of adult education in Sale, which means we have an office and all the administrative support which is there because I work there. Some people do their very best out of their front lounge room, with a few people having a meeting where they decide that they want to have something at the local primary school or something down the main street, a bit of a demonstration. That is all they have. I do not need to tell you people what photocopying and all those sorts of things cost any program.

The sort of thing that David Phillips and I have talked about is having perhaps, as Alison said, maybe stick with the DPI regions or with a position like mine in the four places. Then when people like the ladies sitting behind me want to do something we will help them do it. That is what we did with the project that we did with the Meerlieu ladies. They thought they would like to do something relating to farm safety. We were the ones with the money, expertise, network and so forth that put it together. I do not think you could fund 35 or 36 farm safety groups. That would just be ——
Ms HOWE — Horrendous.

Ms TUCKER — You could not; some of those little groups are only sort of subgroups of a Landcare group or something like that.

Dr NAPTHINE — Jill, have you seen the Ouyen children’s Farmsafe day, and what do you think about that?

Ms TUCKER — I think Ouyen saw ours first, Denis.

Ms HOWE — We actually sent a lot of information to Jennifer Grigg, but we do not say that to anybody. Let us say we networked a lot and we sent a lot of information to them.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you think that sort of program is good, irrespective of who does it?

Ms TUCKER — Yes, it is; we know from the feedback. We have run three of these over the last six years or so focused on grades 5 and 6. Every second year we try to do it — except we have run out of money. We take, as I say, six days to run it to because we have to spread ourselves around and bring the schools in to each spot. You get the feedback from the schools and the parents and the little posters and things. This book, My Brother Pete, which I think Craig has seen, we ran through the Meerilieu school. Young Jack produced this book about the nine lives of his little brother and all the things that have happened. That was a project where we asked the school and the kids and the parents to be involved. I am sure that Jack will probably be the safest farmer about in time.

Dr NAPTHINE — After you have run these sorts of things, if one of the messages — and I am not sure whether this is one of the messages you sell — is that children under 16 should not ride ATVs or children over 16 should wear a helmet when they ride ATVs, do you do any follow-up to see if that message has actually resulted in any change in practice on the farms?

Ms HOWE — We have no funding to do that. We would love to do that. We actually do an evaluation. We have the children fill out a questionnaire prior to the field day, to assess their current level of information. Then two weeks after the field day, so that they have had time to forget it or remember it, we actually go back with the same questionnaire to see how they then respond to it. There are at 26 or 28 questions on it, and there is a difference in the responses. One of the ones that really stood out was the number of children who do not know the 000 number for emergency. That was a real highlight. We then are able to explain it to the teacher who then corrects it. However, we have not followed up in the long term. But there are evaluations, and Monash University has that information.

Ms TUCKER — It gives us a chance through those evaluation sheets to see what is missing in kids’ information. They all want to dial 911, and they still want to cut and suck a snakebite. We let the teachers know where the gaps are.

There is good material out there for teachers to use with RIPPER, Giddy Goanna and all those sorts of projects that have been put together, but primary school teachers are like any other teachers; they have enough on their plates. If they are not farm orientated themselves they would find it difficult to pick up a book and say, ‘Where do I start?’ because they would not know what a PTO is. But if you give them step-by-step material to use and perhaps go to the school and help them, of course they will.

The teachers who come along to these days love it; they think it is fantastic. They hear what the WorkSafe chap talks about, such as safe machinery and tractors. They hear what the ambos say about emergency first aid. They hear the local stock and station agent who talks about being careful around animals, how to behave around them and why — all that sort of stuff. They take it on board and then can deal with the issues back at school through all sorts of things, including CD-ROMs and the stuff that is there for the schools.

The CHAIR — You have answered the question, but it would be good for you to enunciate more. If your position was funded 2, 3, 4 or 5 days a week, what would change in the programs you are running now? What would happen that is different to now? What sorts of things would you use that time for?

Ms TUCKER — I would spend time doing the children’s program. It might mean writing more submissions to WorkSafe or DHS — whoever is going to come up with it. We can get out and do more of these
evenings like the one Craig was at, and the Meerlieu ladies’ one at Tubbut. They take a bit of organising, but people in more remote areas feel like they are neglected in many ways. I would like to make the effort to go to them. I would like to do them all over the state, but that is unrealistic. I would like to at least stick to doing it in Gippsland, which is a big place. We are doing it at Tubbut because at the one at Gelantipy a chap came up and said, ‘This is a fantastic night. Do you reckon we could do this up in my area?’ I said, ‘If you get the people there, we will come up’. I would like to develop a project with stock transport drivers about the fall-from-heights program. You know how upset they are about putting harnesses or scaffolds around these transport trucks. I have really copped it about that, and there are a couple of things we could do to make it more acceptable.

I have also had some concerns in the past about hearing loss. I do not want to run tests on 70-year-olds who are already deaf. I want to get down to the kids who are using firearms and the kids in agricultural departments of TAFE colleges who are riding motorbikes and all sorts of stuff and do not even think about hearing protection. There are all sorts of encouraging little programs you can develop with little carrots attached to them to get people along. Sometimes it just takes one person to do it and their neighbour then says, ‘That is a good idea’, and follows on. But you cannot just give up, or I do not think you can.

Mr INGRAM — With your current programs, even if you were funded five days a week, do you think you would get the message to all farmers? Is that different in more isolated communities? With the one at Gelantipy and the one at Tubbut, you are probably going to get a higher percentage of the farmers there than you are at, say, Orbost or Bairnsdale where you have a larger group of people. How do you get your message — because I do not think it is just the money — to all of the people who are at risk?

Ms HOWE — You infiltrate the networks. I will use an example, because I am looking after some children on a very well-established property at the moment. I always sow the seeds at the table when I have coffee. We always have discussions about not wearing a helmet when you are riding a motorbike et cetera blah, blah, blah. There is a long driveway that crosses the southern rural water channel, so I explained to them what we did at the research farm at Macalister, where children had to walk down the driveway every day to the bus stop. There was a temptation for them to play ‘plop in the channel’, which we all do. There was the potential for them to fall into the channel, and when it is flowing fast it can be dangerous. I had that discussion I do not remember how many months ago.

I am there again this week, and to his credit the farmer has built the best fence I have ever seen across the sides of the irrigation channel down his main driveway. It has taken more than 12 months, but I sowed the seed long ago, and it is the influence you have just by communicating. If you can get to a Landcare group and talk to 10 people, that can have a ripple effect.

Ms TUCKER — There are little groups that you can get into, like Landcare. We go along to the VFF regional meetings they have every month or whatever. It is very good, is it not?

Ms HOWE — Word of mouth is very powerful.

Ms TUCKER — I do not know that we can get to them all. I would like to believe we could.

Mr INGRAM — With the best intentions, what is a realistic aim? Denis mentioned that we have done a lot of work, but there have still been a number of fatalities this year. What is the best possible outcome that you would be aiming at?

Ms HOWE — These are the numbers, are they not?

Ms TUCKER — I would like to believe that we could reach at least 70 or 80 per cent of the farmers. Of that percentage you might only make another 70 or 80 per cent aware and get them to think about things. The next step is to actually get them to do something. The way they got the ROPS program to do something was first of all to hand out a carrot and then come down with a big stick. The WorkSafe guys will tell you that there are still heaps of tractors — drive around and have a look — without ROPS on them.

Mr MITCHELL — We saw one today.

Ms HOWE — Did you report it? If it was on a trailer, potentially it was going to Wells to get fixed.
Ms TUCKER — He will not fix it! With our STAPs program, farmers would say, ‘Yes, I would love one of those steps built’. And they would bring in a tractor without a ROPS on it. And I will say, ‘No way! We are not giving you a subsidy to put steps on your tractor if you have not got a ROPS on it’.

I would like to believe that, given the time, money and input, and everybody angling at everybody — the Landcare, the VFF, the Target 10s — all of the groups. We are always putting fliers out with Murray-Goulburn. Every time we send out info like that, we just keep at them.

Ms HOWE — Saturate them.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you do it by a message a month? I love that book you have.

Ms HOWE — Would it not be great to have funding to produce it as a real book for every school library? Simple things can have a good effect.

Dr NAPTHINE — There are simple things. The message for July could be, ‘Cut off your ladders to a level where your kids cannot reach them’; or the message for September could be, ‘Do something to cover your sheep dip things’. Instead of trying to be too general by saying ‘Improve you farm safety’ you could actually give them a task to do.

Ms HOWE — Personally I think word of mouth and peer pressure tend to have a much bigger impact. You still have to get the farmer to read it. How, now Kippy Cow?, which comes out every month, has a safety message in it, but we do not know how many people read it, let alone take notice of it. But if you are talking face to face with a farmer, and he tells you, ‘Gosh, last week I built a fence across that channel. It really worked. The wife is happy and the children are much safer’, that is much more powerful than any safety message that is in print. There is a certain amount of information overload that comes to a farmer’s desk; it does not get read and gets turfed, particularly if it looks like a newsletter. By the time you read a newsletter it is old hat anyway because it takes so long to get out. It is important to keep doing that sort of thing, but there needs to be a diverse approach. There is the old saturation point, then you might get the 70 per cent. I do not know.

Ms TUCKER — We have got to the point where farmers ring us up and ask us about things because they do not want to contact WorkSafe in case WorkSafe finds out about them and comes to visit them. They will ring up and say, ‘Have you got anything on this?’ or, ‘Can you tell me about that?’. We have got heaps of stuff that WorkSafe give us, and we work really well with the WorkSafe blokes. Our field officer is a very good fellow. He does not take prisoners on occasions. He is amenable and fair, but he still knows the rules and expects them to know them, too. Someone rang two weeks ago and said, ‘Is there still a subsidy to put ROPS on my tractor?’. Come on, lady, you have got to be joking!

Ms HOWE — At least that person was game enough to ring and ask. I am sure that others have still thought it. I guess the other question about funding that I was concerned about is that we have some funding at the moment but it is obviously project based on the STAPs project and the one day a week from Farmsafe Alliance. What we are looking for is that extra day so that we can sit and develop new projects, sit and contact all the networks, sit and write the funding submissions. The one we wrote for the primary schools project was all done on voluntary time. It just gets harder and harder to get the money. What we are really after is that one day a week that is ongoing funding for the position to be there and not based on a project that has a start and finish date, because you cannot be working on the STAPs project and running a funding submission for something else. That is just not how it works, but in reality that is what gets done. What we are looking for is that those four regional positions are funded to facilitate the farm safety action groups in their region as a coordinator. I think that would be only be good thing.

Mr WALSH — Jill, is there any way we can break that cultural divide between farmers and WorkSafe?

Ms TUCKER — Getting people out.

Mr WALSH — It is an issue, and we get mixed messages. In some places WorkSafe officers will not tell people how they could potentially solve a problem. They will just say, ‘You’ve got a problem, you fix it’.

Ms TUCKER — That is right.
Mr WALSH — Other places they apparently will give advice as to what is the best way to do it.

Ms TUCKER — Some of the field officers probably need a few lessons in public relations. Our guy here does not. I know how he operates, and he has been good. Going out to the little communities, in the community we went to at Meerilieu one gentleman got very upset. He wanted to know what right somebody had to come onto his farm, and he began shouting and waving his arms and carrying on. The WorkSafe fellow just kept a smooth and even response to him, never raised his voice, was polite and friendly. I thought to myself, ‘You idiot. You have a farm and you’re screaming abuse at the field officer’. Phil said to me later, ‘He’ll keep’. That was some time ago now, but he will get around to it. That is the last thing we want. That is what we promote at these evenings, that they are user friendly, no big sticks, there are plenty of subsidies about, grab hold of them — all that sort of stuff. That is the sort of atmosphere we have developed at those things. I do not know. I think it is a personality thing. Some people, if you put a uniform or a badge on them, they get a bit carried away.

Mr WALSH — But does there need to be a change in the job description of what those people do, for argument’s sake? If we are going to make recommendations, we need to not just say, ‘Improve the personalities’, because that might not be achievable with some people.

Ms TUCKER — No, it is not.

Mr WALSH — Is their job description at the moment the wrong job description?

Ms HOWE — Well, they have two roles. One is enforcement and one is education, and it is the same person doing both. I do not see that as a problem because we have a really good guy here; he can do both very well. He comes to the social evenings with the farm safety theme with a very good attitude. It is a question-and-answer meeting. Craig was there; his saw it. You probably would not change his description at all, because he does it very well. But for somebody who does it differently, maybe you would need to. My only comment is that he is one person from the river down there to the border this way. He cannot be in all places at once.

Ms TUCKER — He has an apprentice at the moment.

Ms HOWE — Which is really wonderful.

Mr WALSH — Has he got a good personality?

Ms TUCKER — We have not meet him yet.

Ms HOWE — The other thing I wanted to say, just to go back on a point, was that ripple effect. Had we not gone to Gelantipy then the five farm safety audits, checklists, walks — whatever you would like to call them — that were conducted would never have happened. Andrew Sullivan would never have got the inquiries for the farm safety training course had we not gone to Gelantipy.

Mr INGRAM — And you would not be going to Tubbut?

Ms TUCKER — No, we would not.

Ms HOWE — However, there is some doubt as to whether we can actually take the WorkSafe man to Tubbut with us.

Ms TUCKER — The Traralgon department is so short of funds that it is not sure it can spare him for an afternoon, and it is a long way to drive.

Ms HOWE — And he cannot drive by himself.

Ms TUCKER — She said leave it with her, and I will until Thursday. She said that the boss down there said they have run out of money and they are not sure there are enough funds for him to go away to a function like that and have to pay for his accommodation and the extra hours he works.

Mr INGRAM — How much is the accommodation?
Ms HOWE — It is $49.50. It is okay; we have got it. Do you want to come? We have actually WorkCover New South Wales coming as well, because Tubbut is so close to the border.

Ms TUCKER — And they were thrilled. We thought, ‘The regulation is little bit different on both sides of the border; we’ll ask WorkCover New South Wales’. They were delighted. They thought it was a terrific idea. They said, ‘Yes, we’ll come along’. Now I might not have the Victorian — I will, even if I have to talk to Barry Pratt or somebody.

Ms HOWE — That is why we want the funding, to keep doing those things, because you are actually talking to farmers. You have an audience of farmers, it has a ripple effect, it is face to face, it is cost effective and it seems to be working. However, I do not know how we measure it. Maybe you want to ask some farmer’s wife who has him for an extra five years that she did not think she was going to. How would you measure it, Craig? You are a farmer.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Jill and Alison, for giving us your time today. I know that you have put a lot of time and effort into the submission. You will get a copy of the transcript and you can correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.