

AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS WHITE PAPER

Submission: Julii Gaunt

As former Western Australian dairy farmer, I recognise the commitment Federal Government is making towards the continuation of farming by Australian families with the development of the *Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper*. Through my work within the agricultural communities of WA since 2010, I have identified directions for increasing farm profitability and strengthening our rural and regional communities.

The validity in this submission lies in the reduction of the numbers of serious injuries and fatalities which occur within the Australian Agricultural sector.

In the Safe Work Australia (February 2013) publication *Work-related Injuries and Fatalities on Australian Farms*, a survey showed that over 17,000 agricultural workers had incurred a work-related injury or illness in the past 12 months (2009-10). Additionally, from July 2003 to June 2011, 356 workers died while working on an Australian farming property.

Fatalities and serious injuries come at great cost to the communities in which they occur. The financial strain on already limited resources, including the costs to affected families, businesses, and voluntary services; as well as the costs to those affected either directly or indirectly by the incident are not finite. In smaller regional or remote communities, the incident may lead to work being handed to a less skilled person in the absence of the injured party, thereby compounding the risk.

The emotional cost to those affected by an incident; including witnesses, employers, first aiders, medical services ect may be ongoing and can range from mild to acute stress. This stress transfers through employees, families and communities and becomes an additional burden to bear by the affected persons.

“Work-related injuries, illnesses and deaths impose costs on employers, workers and the community. These include both direct costs and indirect costs. Direct costs include items such as workers’ compensation premiums paid by employers or payments to injured or incapacitated workers from workers’ compensation jurisdictions. Indirect costs include items such as lost productivity, loss of current and future earnings, lost potential output and the cost of providing social welfare programs for injured or incapacitated workers. The level of costs borne by each economic agent varies with the severity of the injury or disease. While measures of direct costs are understood and reasonably simple to measure, these costs cover only a fraction of the total cost of work-related injury and disease.”

Excerpt:

THE COST OF WORK-RELATED INJURY AND ILLNESS FOR AUSTRALIAN EMPLOYERS, WORKERS AND THE COMMUNITY: 2008-09

On a wider note, the cost to the industry profile and the long term effect these incidents have on the profile of Australian agriculture can span over many years. The expectation of purchasers, supply chains, industry bodies and marketing groups is that food and fibre is produced in an ethical and responsible manner, where persons involved from ground level up are trained, supervised and given

adequate support in their roles so that they may contribute to the production of the net product. This is a basic requirement of Occupational Health and Safety legislation, and the foundation on which all other OHS regulation is structured.

The Western Australian legislation known as the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 1984*, and the *Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 1996*, are a benchmark for future proofing the Agricultural Industry. Obtaining compliance is the key to reducing the number of serious injuries and fatalities, and this will lead to greater benefits to the industry as a whole.

Agricultural industries lie within regional communities, and the whole community is built around the regions agricultural pursuits. Satellite support industries form and this necessitates the movement of families into these regions. This combination brings together a community who rely on the support, capital and infrastructure each member supplies. In the event of a serious incident which results in a fatality or injury, all members of this community are affected in some way shape or form.

The full outcomes of these accidents and incidents to regional communities, their support services and the individual members is immeasurable. Similarly, the effect on the agricultural industry body, and the consumer or end user is not easily definable. Prevention of incidents through successful assessment of hazards and risks is the best form of occupational safety and health management.

I recognise that traditional farming families have their own form of safety assessment, and know that to be effective and successful over the long-term, there must be strong and collaborative engagement at the state and regional levels. The Western Australian body *Agricultural Industries Safety Group (ASIG)* acts as a contributory voice for safety in Agriculture. The Group liaises with Government, industry members and industry bodies to best achieve OHS compliance to reduce the number of injuries and fatalities within agricultural workplaces. A collaborative approach ensures that there is a strong partnership between WorkSafe (WA), the Industry bodies, and the farmers.

Through my work in Occupational Safety and Health, I have identified opportunities and solutions to achieve a strong and sustainable future in Australian agriculture, and have developed a strategy to assist and support farmers in the pursuit of occupational safety and health compliance. Compliance will lead to greater stability in the agricultural industry.

Too many persons in industry see OSH legislation as a restrictive and invasive system instigated by regulatory bodies to inhibit and undermine the way businesses manage their day-to-day working lives.

I see the regulative framework as being a necessary benchmark for businesses to monitor whether they are operating as a minimum, within safety and health regulation. These regulations are designed to direct persons to safe systems of work, thereby limiting the known effects of hazards in the workplace.

Focus should be placed on assisting farmers to utilise the OSH Acts and OSH Regulations to their benefit.

I have determined the following in support of OSH compliance:

- Agricultural industries are endeavouring to show greater leadership and culture in relation to safety and health issues and events
- Supply chains and networks are already demanding auditing of food safety standards, and the addition of OSH compliance is developing across the board
- Agricultural employers are recognising there is a greater need for raising the levels of safety and health capabilities of workers and contractors
- Safer industry standards leads to attracting and retaining workers in regional areas
- Regional and remote agricultural communities benefit from strong leadership and business cultures
- The gaining of industry related finance, loans, funding and grants by an agricultural employer will be measured in part against the businesses compliance with OSH legislation
- The insuring and subsequent claims of agricultural ventures and businesses is based on compliance with OSH legislation
- The enhancement of export markets will be built on the management plan of the business, to which safety forms an important component
- The incentive to agricultural businesses which utilise training, job creation and employment schemes based on government initiatives will be higher
- Competitive marketing strategies can be benchmarked against the ethical employment and use of skilled and trained labour

Overall, Western Australia maintains a high level of OSH commitment through legislation, and the agricultural industries in this state are constantly working to further develop and implement improvements in the safety and health of its members.