

INQUIRY INTO ASPECTS OF AGRICULTURE IN NSW

Organisation: Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety
Name: Associate Professor Lyn Fragar
Position: Director
Telephone: (02) 6752 8210
Date received: 5/09/2007



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR AGRICULTURAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

University of Sydney
PO Box 256, Moree NSW 2400

Submission to the Standing Committee on State Development Inquiry into aspects of agriculture in NSW

Associate Professor Lyn Fragar AO
Director

This submission addresses the following Terms of Reference

Item 1:

- a. impediments to sustaining appropriate levels of productive capacity and growth in the agriculture industry
- b. initiatives to address impediments to sustaining appropriate levels of productive capacity and growth in the agriculture industry, having regard to the NSW State Plan priority areas of *“Growing prosperity Across NSW”* and *“Environment for Living”*.

	Page
1. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety	2
2. Recent experiences of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety working with people in agriculture industries in NSW	3
3. The profile of the people in the agricultural industries	4
4. Key impediments to sustaining productive capacity in the agriculture industries in NSW associated with the ageing farmer workforce.	5
5. Key impediments to sustaining productive capacity in the agriculture industries in NSW associated with increased record keeping needs and meeting regulatory requirements.	9
6. Key impediments to sustaining productive capacity in the agriculture industries in NSW associated with physical and social isolation	11

1. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety

The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety is a research centre within the Department of Public Health and Community Medicine of the Faculty of Medicine with affiliation with the Faculty of Agriculture. Its establishment within the University of Sydney is subject to a contractual agreement with Hunter New England Health and NSW Health that provide infrastructure funding on fixed term contractual bases.

The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety is a constituent member of the Australian Rural Health Research Collaboration, in partnership with New England Health, Greater Western Health, North Coast Health, Broken Hill and Lismore University Departments of Rural Health and the centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health.

The Centre is the Administration Centre for Farmsafe Australia and works with agriculture industries, government and non-government agencies around Australia to achieve improved farm safety.

Mission

The mission of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety is:

“Action research to assist rural Australians to attain improved levels of health and wellbeing by reducing the incidence and severity of injury and illness associated with life and work in agriculture”

People and programs

The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety has brought together an interdisciplinary team of people who are working with the Australian agricultural community, to implement a directed program of research and development aimed at ultimately improving the health and wellbeing of the farming population in Australia. The team is unique in its approach in bringing public health derived information and approaches into the agricultural sector and in building partnerships with various agricultural agencies to address health and safety problems.

Action research at the Centre has achieved:

1. Establishment of priorities for industry and governments for injury prevention on farms
2. Campaigns, based on evidence of effectiveness, addressing key hazards:
 - Tractor safety
 - Farm machinery safety
 - Farm workshop safety
 - Noise and hearing injury
 - ATV safety
 - Managing the pressures of farming
3. Campaigns targeting key at-risk groups

- Child safety on farms
- The safety of older farmers
- The safety of Aboriginal rural workers

New programs being developed include:

1. The safety of younger workers
2. The health of the farming population.

Key action research to date has directly, or indirectly achieved:

- National Tractor Safety campaign and ROPS retro-fitment on 25000~~0~~ older tractors in 4 states
- Safe Access design for retrofitment to tractors with unsafe access
- Farm risk management resources for farmers and managers in all key industries
- Changes in knowledge, awareness and behaviour for safety of children on farms
- Changed code for design of guarding of grain augers

2. Recent experiences of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety working with people in agriculture industries in NSW

Farm health and safety data

The centre maintains the National Farm Injury Data Centre that is responsible for reporting on health and safety status of the agriculture sector using the range of databases available, including ABS deaths data, hospital admissions data, workers compensation data and other research data.

Projects involving direct contact with NSW farmers

Programs and projects of the Centre have been bringing us into direct contact with farmers and farmer organisations around NSW and Australia more widely.

Activities have included:

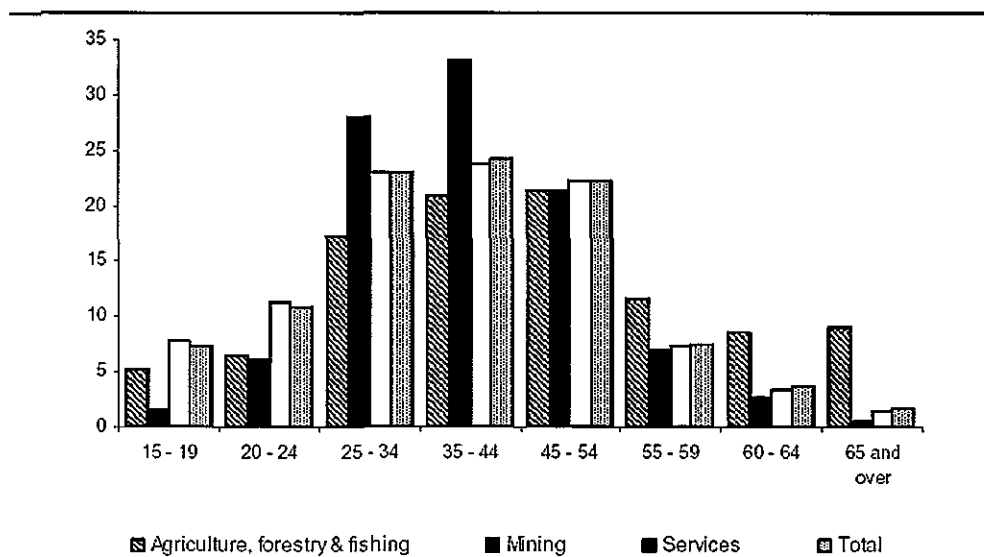
- *Training workshops* for farmers in *Managing Farm Safety*
- Farm Safety *benchmarking workshops* for farmers in north west NSW
- Workshops with older and younger farmers in NSW examining the issue of *managing business and family pressures*
- *Workshops with older farmers* examining ways that farm work can be made easier as farmers get older
- *Falls prevention workshops* with older farmers
- Meetings with farmers across north west NSW as part of the range of programs of *Northwest Farmsafe*

3. The profile of the people in the agricultural industries

In brief, NSW agriculture is reliant for the next decade on a highly skilled farmer workforce that is

- ageing
- increasingly socially and physically isolated across rural NSW
- finding it difficult to get the employees that they need to keep going.

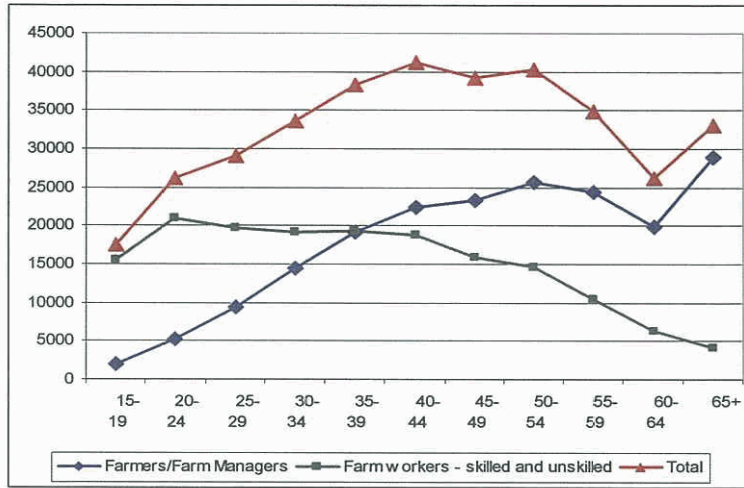
Age profile of agricultural workforce compared with mining and services sector, and all sectors, 2004. Percent



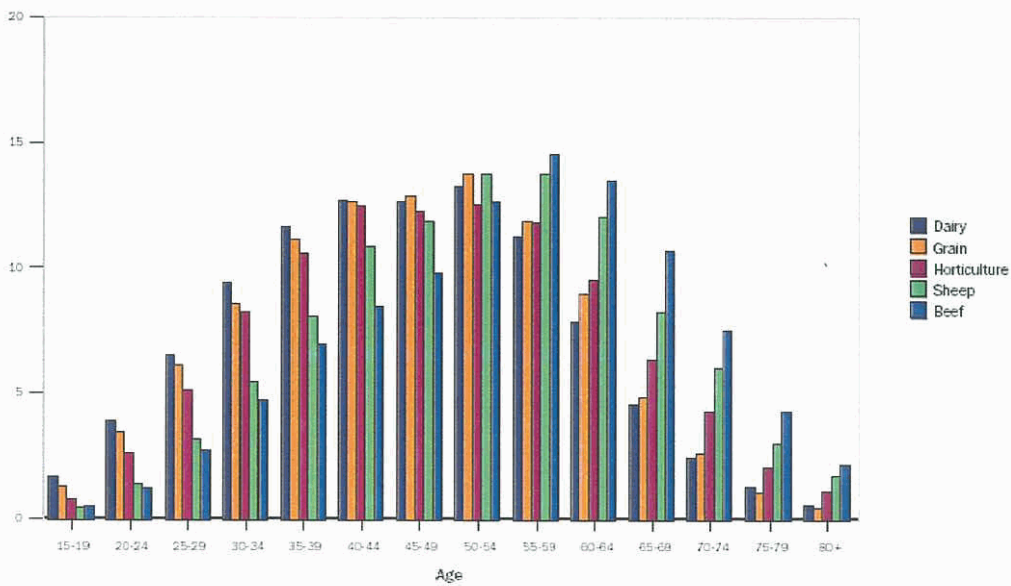
Data source: ABS (Cat no. 6291.0.55.001).

Source: Productivity Commission, 2005. *Trends in Australian Agriculture*. Research Paper, Canberra

Occupation by age in agriculture and horticulture. 2001 Census of Population and Housing.
Australian Bureau of Statistics



Proportion of farmers and farm managers by specific industry is informative



Source: *The Micro-Dynamics of Change in Australian Agriculture 1976-2001* (Barr, 2004)

4. Key impediments to sustaining productive capacity in the agriculture industries in NSW associated with the ageing farmer workforce.

1. Farming is more risky in relation to safety

Non intentional fatalities of farmers and farm workers*, by age group, Australia 1999 2002 (number and raw fatality rate* per 1,000 employed in agriculture)

Occupation	Injury deaths			
	15-54 years		55+ years	
	n	Rate / 1,000	n	Rate / 1,000
Farmer & farm managers	200	1.6	382	5.2
Farm workers	196	2.4	32	2.8
Total	396	1.9	414	4.9

Source: ABS Mortality Data (HOIST), January 2006

*Raw rate based on 2001 ABS Census population figures

2. Older farmers are subject to the normal processes of ageing

The Older Farmers project of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety has held meetings with older farmers in 6 NSW communities, and 8 in other states, and is documenting the challenges that are being faced in operating farms as they get older.

Changes as we get older relate to:

- Stamina and energy to get through a day's work without a rest, and making job slower
- Power of concentration for long periods for physical and mental tasks
- Joint pain and stiffness, making much physical work a growing challenge
- Ability to adapt quickly to changes in procedures
- Memory lapses, making work slower and less productive
- Poor night vision, making evening and night work difficult
- Poor hearing, making communication difficult
- Likelihood of needing prescription medications, adding to risk.

3. Older farmers experience a range of challenges in trying to remain productive as a result of their age.

Farmers have identified the farm jobs that are more difficult, and resources and programs are being prepared to assist older farmers in making their work easier and safer.

4. Many older farmers want to stay in the industry

However, unless there is more recognition of the importance of, and the needs of these older farmers, many will be forced to give up earlier than they wish, or than the State would wish.

Recommendation

In the development of agriculture policy and planning aimed at improving productivity and competitiveness for NSW, recognition must be given to the challenges faced by the older majority of the farmer workforce.

5. Key impediments to sustaining productive capacity in the agriculture industries in NSW associated with increased record keeping needs and meeting regulatory requirements.

The recent report of the costs of bureaucratic red tape for the period 1998 to 2006 was recently released by the National Farmers Federation. (Sandy McEachern John Francis, David Lee. 2007. *The Cost of Bureaucratic Red Tape in Agriculture*. Holmes Sackett Pty Ltd PO Box 5757 Wagga Wagga NSW 2650).

This report found that the average farm:

- Had a total expense of \$22,542 per annum relating to bureaucratic red tape.
- Had a total of approximately 18 days taken up on tasks associated with bureaucratic red tape which equates to 3.6 full weeks (5 days) or 7.5% of the working year.
- The total expense of \$22,542 per annum relating to bureaucratic red tape relates to 3% of income, 4% of total expenses and 14% of net farm profit of these farms.

Older farmers report practical difficulty with meeting the changing and growing requirements for record keeping and meeting regulatory requirements. Older farmers report being too tired at the end of the working day to get the paperwork done after dinner, in the way they would have done when they were younger and the red tape was less. Younger farmers are less troubled by these requirements.

An example of regulations that seem “over the top” from a small business perspective is the section of the NSW OHS regulations relating to consultation with employees. No farmer has challenged the importance of consultation and involvement of workers in their farm safety program. However, you can see why meeting the requirements is a challenge for farmer where they may only engage casual workers for short periods of the year.

The employer must consult on the procedures for consultation, that is, whether consultation is to be undertaken by means of an OHS committee, an OHS representative or other agreed arrangements, or a combination of those means.

- An OHS Committee must be established if the employer employs 20 or more employees and the majority of employees so requests or Workcover so directs.
- An OHS representative must be elected if at least one of the employees so requests or Workcover so directs.
- Other arrangements for consultation require agreement between the employer and the employees.

If the proposed OHS consultation arrangements provide for either an OHS committee or OHS representative, then there are specific requirements over what the employer must consult on, including composition of the committee, representation of work groups including casual and seasonal workers, meetings arrangements etc.

If the proposed OHS consultation arrangements do not include an OHS committee or OHS representative, the employer must consult workers on:

- arrangements with respect to meetings with the employer,
- communication with the employees,
- the functions and training of the persons involved,
- the procedures for resolving occupational health and safety issues,
- the role of any relevant industrial organisation of employees, and

- other relevant matters.

OHS consultation arrangements are to be reviewed as occasion requires.

Minimum requirements for OHS committees are laid down in the Regulation.

Minimum requirements are laid down for election of OHS representatives are laid down in the Regulation.

An employer has the following obligations in connection with OHS consultation arrangements:

- To record those arrangements,
- To publicise those arrangements among existing and new employees to whom they relate,
- To provide members of OHS committees or OHS representatives with reasonable access to the employees they represent during working hours for the purposes of communication,
- To provide reasonable facilities, and access during working hours to the workplace, for the purposes of OHS consultation arrangements (including for the purposes of conducting or holding elections, meetings and inspections),
- To ensure that employer representatives on an OHS committee participate in the work of the committee on a regular basis,
- To ensure that employees participating in consultation (and in training for consultation) in accordance with OHS consultation arrangements are paid as if they were engaged in the duties of their employment (whether they participate as representatives of employees or of the employer),
- To pay the costs reasonably and necessarily incurred by employees in connection with their participation in that consultation or training,
- To facilitate the OHS consultation arrangements of another employer where employees of that other employer are working at the employer's place of work.

An OHS committee and an OHS representative have the following additional functions:

- To make a request to accompany an inspector as an observer on an inspection under section 69 (b) of the Act that affects the workgroup that the committee or representative represents,
- To be an observer during any formal report by an inspector to the employer in connection with any occupational health and safety matter concerning the workgroup that the committee or representative represents,
- To accompany an employee of the workgroup that the committee or representative represents, at the request of the employee, during any interview by the employer on any occupational health and safety issue,
- To be an observer during any formal in-house investigation of an accident or other occurrence at the relevant place of work that is required to be notified to WorkCover under Division 4 of Part 5 of the Act,
- To assist in the development of arrangements for recording workplace hazards and accidents to promote improved workplace health and safety,
- To make recommendations on the training of members of OHS committees and of OHS representatives,
- To make recommendations on the training of employees in relation to occupational health and safety.

An employer must ensure that each member of an OHS committee and each OHS representative undertakes a course of training in accordance with requirements laid down in the Regulation.

Recommendation

That the agriculture sector be a priority for examination of the impact of red tape on productivity, taking into account the age profile of the farmers dealing with this over the next decade.

6. Key impediments to sustaining productive capacity in the agriculture industries in NSW associated with physical, social and isolation

The mental health and wellbeing of all population groups depends upon maintaining some degree of effective interaction and engagement with other people.

Farmers and farm families in NSW are increasingly isolated from the wider community as a result of:

1. Increasing farm size and reduced number of farms
2. Decreasing local opportunities for social interaction
 - Fewer people on one property, and in close vicinity
 - Decline in use of local stock markets
 - Loss of church services in local area
 - Less opportunity to have drinks on Friday, Saturday nights due to limits on alcohol consumption and driving
3. Increasing cost of fuel and many farms lack finances to travel to town.

To this must be added the increasing sense of isolation from metropolitan people and experience. Farming people in NSW are reporting a strong and growing sense of isolation from their fellow metropolitan citizens, and they don't know how to turn this around. The metropolitan based press tends to report only the failures and difficulties in the agriculture sector.

Results of 2 research projects are of relevance:

1. The pressures of farming project

In this project with farmers in the shires of Narrabri, Moree Plains and Gwydir, the following were reported as the pressures that farmers find hardest to cope with:

1. Most Difficult Business Pressures to cope with

- Finance
- Government regulations and red tape
- Drought/weather
- Family members perspectives
- Lack of time

2. Most Difficult Family Pressures

- Finance for family needs
- Getting the Government red tape needs met
- Drought/weather
- Time for family

3. Most Difficult Individual Pressures

- Time for oneself
- Physical/Medical needs
- Computer skills- lack of

- Marketing skills and knowledge – lack of

Adverse effects reported by failure to cope with these were clearly resulting in reduced productivity.

On the Business

- Impacts on best management of farm's resources
- Adverse impact on finances
- Jobs not getting done efficiently/effectively or safely

On the Family

- Breakdown
- Conflict
- Finance for family needs
- Time for family/social

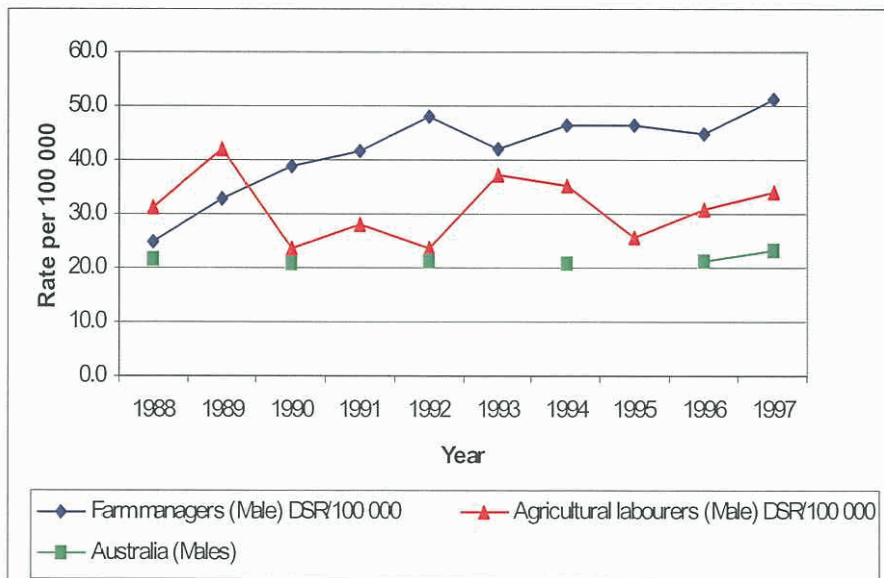
On the Individual

- Mental impacts
- Physical impacts- tiredness,
- Time for personal relaxation, social time

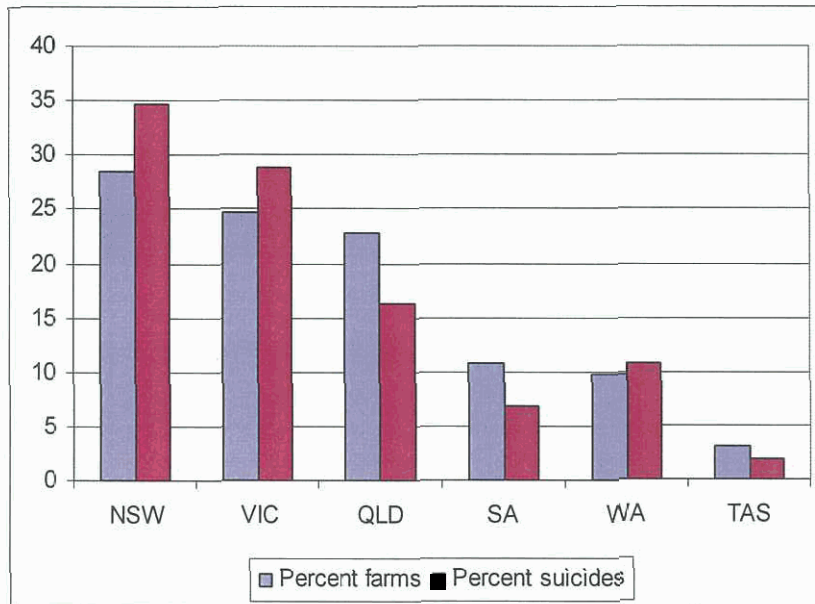
2. Farmer suicide

The results of this study were published in the Australia and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry (Page and Fragar)

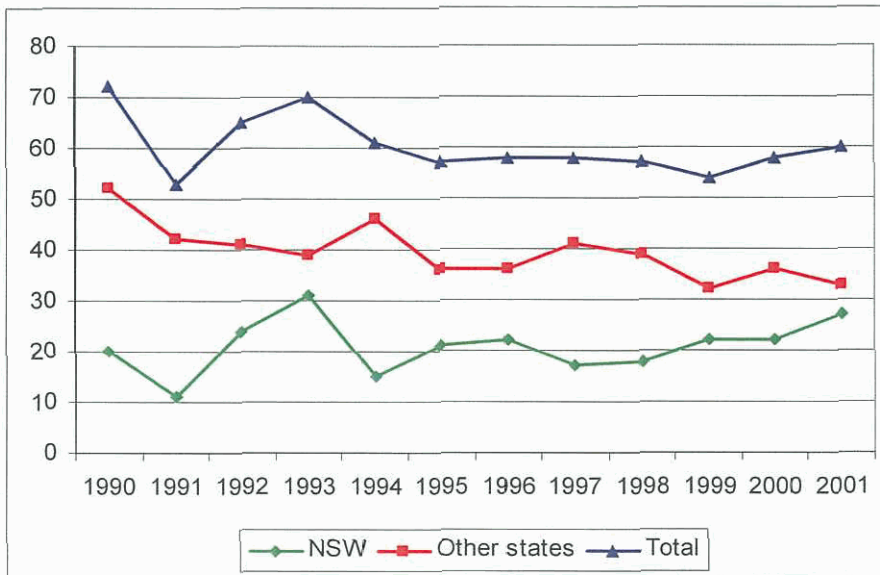
Suicide deaths per 100000 (Age standardized) Australia 1988 to 1997



NSW has 28.5% of Australian farms, and for the period 1990-2001 had 34.6% of male farmer/manager suicides



Number of male farmer and farm manager suicides NSW 1990 to 2001



Recommendations

- 1. NSW farmers and farm families need support to maintain opportunities to stay connected to others in their immediate community and to other farmers in both a professional and social sense.**
- 2. NSW farmers need support to improve their sense participation in the NSW state community.**

This requires serious and immediate attention.

- 3. My personal recommendation is that NSW develop its Agriculture Policy along the lines of that of Scotland. This would require a serious sitting down together that would be useful as a process, would involve the current agri-political association, but include farming women and families, young farmers and aim for a be bi-partisan approach.**

The vision of the Scotland Agriculture Policy is of *"a prosperous farming industry, one of Scotland's success stories, which benefits all the people of Scotland"*.

Such a vision is way better than the NSW statement in the State Plan where *"Strong rural and regional economies depend on profitable and sustainable primary industries"* relegates the value of agriculture to rural communities alone.