

Mr. Elton Humphrey  
Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs Committee – Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

12<sup>th</sup> November 2009

**Re: Questions on notice - Sub 33 Farmsafe Australia**

**Dear Sir,**

On Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November, I appeared as a witness before the above Senate Committee in Sydney, on behalf of Farmsafe Australia. At the hearing, I was asked to provide further information on workers compensation claims in agriculture; and financial access of farmers to hearing services offered by Australian Hearing. I would like to provide this information here, as requested.

**1. Access to Australian Hearing services**

Clarification was required as to the 'asset test' requirement for hearing services provided by Australian Hearing. In particular, the question was asked about access to services by children from farming families.

Dr. Margaret Dewberry of Australian Hearing, clarified in the following session, that the asset test did not apply to children, or those up to 21 years of age – no matter the income/assets of parents. However, the intention of raising this in the submission was really meant to highlight the issue of access difficulty by adults.

The 'Australian Hearing' website indicates that eligibility for government hearing services is based on the following criteria –

“Adults eligible to receive Australian Hearing services must be an Australian citizen or a permanent resident 21 years of age or older, and fit one of the following categories:

- Pensioner Concession Card holders
- Department of Veterans' Affairs Gold Repatriation Health Card holders or White Repatriation Health Card holders specifying hearing loss
- Recipients of a sickness allowance from Centrelink.”

Unless there is some other “fine print” criteria for inclusion, these criteria exclude most farmers, who are self-employed family businesses. However, many 'asset-rich-cash poor' farmers, are not in a financial position to afford aids and services, considering other economic pressures associated with ongoing drought and fluctuating commodity prices.

Recommendation:

Perhaps there is some avenue for farmers to be eligible for hearing services, if they qualify for a Centre-link 'health care card', which has a provision for 'low income earners', based on income in the previous 8 weeks. Alternatively, perhaps farmers who qualify for / are receiving assistance

through 'drought support programs', would also be eligible for hearing services. This would in some way compensate for the fact that low income earning self-employed persons such as farmers, are not eligible for a 'pensioner concession card' or 'sickness allowance' from Centrelink, as per requirements for eligibility by Australian Hearing.

## 2. Workers Compensation data on hearing loss within agriculture

- a. Statistics from the Australian Safety Compensation Council (ASCC) NOSI database (accessed on-line on 12/11/09) show that there are around 20 claims annually for hearing loss within the agriculture. For the combined, *Agriculture, forestry & fisheries* group, there are about 30 claims/yr, around 1% of all industry claims for hearing loss (ie. 'Mechanism of injury' as 'Sound and pressure' ).

Industry – Agriculture, forestry & fisheries (ASCC NOSI database):

- 2006-07 25 claims (15 in agriculture)  
0.8% of all industry claims (n=3540)
- 2007-08 40 claims (25 in agriculture sector)  
1.1% of all industry claims (n=3760)

Within the agricultural sector alone (2007-2008), the 25 claims for 'sound and pressure' were less than 1% of total workers compensation claims in agriculture from all causes (n=3085).

- b. The ASCC report *Work-related noise induced hearing loss in Australia* (April 2006) stated that the top four industries for high incidence of hearing loss claims (per 100,000 employees) were (1) Mining (2) Manufacturing (3) Electricity, gas, water supply (4) Transport & storage. This is out of 18 major industry groupings. The incidence rate for agriculture is not reported; and is certainly not singled out for mention as a priority industry for hearing loss claims.

However, the ASCC report also stated that "compensation statistics do not fully reflect the true incidence and cost of industrial deafness" (p.5). Reasons / contributing factors to this include:

- Not all employees are eligible to make claims, due to differing criteria (ASCC 2006 report)
- Only around 54% of the estimated 375,000 strong agricultural workforce (ABS 2006) are actually 'employees'. Most farms are small family owned businesses with no employees
- 'Employees' within agriculture are a relatively young demographic (ABS 2006) Noise injury is often not apparent for a number of years and job movement of young workers can be high – so young workers are less likely to be able to establish a claim
- Hearing screening services in rural areas are often lacking and small family-owned farm businesses can not provide hearing screening services themselves. This means baseline and periodic hearing assessment to establish noise injury is difficult

In conclusion:

The above information confirms the testimony given at the hearing, regarding the incomplete nature of workers compensation claims for hearing loss, relating to agriculture. The actual incidence and prevalence of noise injury in the Australian farming community, is grossly under-stated within the workers compensation system – especially when compared to research conducted at agricultural field days, which is a closer indicator of hearing loss prevalence than 'claims'. For a variety of reasons, the true burden and cost of hearing loss amongst farmers, is largely carried by farmers, farm-workers and their families, themselves.

I trust that you will forward this information to the Committee Senators, in answer to their questions - or follow whatever the appropriate protocol is in such matters.

Thank you, for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,

*Julie Depczynski*

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