

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply

Bendigo – Thursday 23 May 2024

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

WITNESSES

Donna Coutts, and

Stuart Grainger, Macedon Ranges Regenerative Farmers.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you for joining us today at this public hearing for the inquiry into securing Victoria's food supply.

On behalf of the committee I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today with us.

This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting as part of its inquiry into securing Victoria's food supply. I will just run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the committee today. Could you please state your full names and titles before we begin.

Stuart GRAINGER: I am Stuart Grainger. I am a regenerative farmer in the Macedon Ranges, and I have a broader role in the food industry. Up until very recently I ran George Weston Foods, one of the biggest food manufacturers in Victoria.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I will just get Donna to state her name and title too, and then I will throw it open to you. Thank you, Donna.

Donna COUTTS: I am Donna Coutts, and I am a regenerative farmer selling beef and lamb direct to consumers in Victoria and Macedon Ranges.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Back to you, Stuart. Would you like to make some opening remarks for us, please.

Stuart GRAINGER: I think I will leave that for Donna to do, actually. She is probably in the best position to do it.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay, right. Yes, if you can make those remarks.

Donna COUTTS: Thank you very much for asking us to attend today. We really appreciate the opportunity as farmers to speak directly to people who are in the position to make decisions about farming and food supply and food security. We have a number of issues that we would like to talk to today, but perhaps we could start with access to meat processing and access to abattoirs for small farmers like us. It is the biggest risk in our business, access to abattoirs across Victoria, but having access to a local abattoir. At the moment where I am at Spring Hill in the Macedon Ranges I have access to a Kilcoy-owned abattoir, Hardwicks at Kyneton, which is 10 minutes from our farm, and that is a great benefit to be close to where our animals are. But we have no security in that if that company decides that we cannot access that abattoir as small private businesses, we will have to travel much further afield, but the options are very, very limited in Victoria for accessing abattoirs. The only way we can sell meat direct to consumers is to use an abattoir. Would you like to talk, Stuart, about some of the solutions?

Stuart GRAINGER: Yes. I think it is a bit broader than ‘should they decide’. I think they have been quite vocal about saying that they see their direction as being servicing export markets and not small producers like us. I think part of the issue is as the industry has consolidated, as costs of business have become higher, costs of regulation have become higher, these facilities have got bigger and bigger and do not want to service small producers like us. But also it is not just a matter of wanting something local. From a welfare perspective and from the point of view of trying to do something sustainable and regenerative, we really do not want to be sending animals 4 and 5 hours away to be killed and processed. So it is quite an issue.

I really do think – and I have some experience in the food industry more generally – Victoria has the highest cost of doing business and is the most complicated state to operate in food. I think looking at some of the reasons for consolidation and what can be done about costs of doing business is part of this – whether it is within the remit of government to think about whether abattoirs are actually an essential service and should be treated as such and there should be some kind of regulatory mechanism for who they are and are not doing business with. I think also when consolidations and mergers and acquisitions are considered, the transport distance from an animal welfare perspective should be looked at, not just the economics of transporting animals. When they define markets at the moment, they look at what is an economic distance to create the definition of a market, not from a welfare perspective, and I think we need to look at both if we are to have a sustainable base going forward.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. It was remiss of me not to introduce the committee here today. Down the end we have David Hodgett, who is the Member for Croydon; Nicole Werner, the Member for Warrandyte; Martha Haylett, who is the Member for Ripon; and me, Martin Cameron, Deputy Chair and Member for Morwell. Our Chair will be with us shortly, Juliana Addison from Wendouree. And down the end we have Daniela Di Martino from Monbulk. Most of us are regionally based, and as I said before there are few that are city-bound but have those regional connections.

Is there anything else you would like to add before we open up for questions? Yes, keep going.

Stuart GRAINGER: There were two other substantive points that we would like to make. I gather you have had some concerns raised about renewables and emissions. We have got a slightly different challenge in that some of the carbon modelling and some of the emissions modelling that is being done does not take into consideration the type of farming enterprise. It just sort of assumes that all cows are evil. The cows do not get any credit for the grass that is being grown to feed them. For small farmers like us, actually managing the prospective legislation that is coming through will be incredibly difficult and will be quite prejudicial. As regenerative farmers, there is a lot of evidence that what we are doing is actually better than carbon neutral and results in carbon sequestration. None of the models take that into consideration, so we will be thrown into the same kind of lots, almost as feedlotters and people who are potentially adopting less sustainable practices. So we are worried that that (a) curtails what we do and (b) the cost and complexity of dealing with that legislation will be more than a small farm can actually bear.

The third point, Donna – do you want to just talk about farm size and the impact of that in our area?

Donna COUTTS: Yes, to do with land use planning. Where we are – peri-urban Macedon Ranges – land prices have increased significantly over the past 10 or so years, and farmland is really not affordable for most farmers. There is a lot of land banking by property companies and speculators, which creates difficulties for certainty. Farmers would really like some certainty about town boundaries and urban growth boundaries around regional centres. Particularly as regenerative farmers, the way we farm there is no quick fix. It is an investment of time, a lot of labour over a period of years, and to perhaps lease a farm and know that at any time a development could start means it is just not viable to do things like that. For people looking to buy land or lease land or hold on to land, there is a lot of uncertainty, and some planning or zoning controls around townships are really important to define, I think.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We started our regional tour down in my seat, in the seat of Morwell, and one of the stakeholders there suggested to the committee – touching on what you were just talking about there, Donna – that the only return peri-urban farmers get on their business is the capital value of land when they sell up. It is not realistic to expect smaller farmlands to remain productive in the future. Would you like to comment further on those observations, and what are the key challenges to the viability of the smaller farms?

Donna COUTTS: One solution would be to reward farmers for using sustainable practices so that there is a trade-off when it comes to rezoning; if a farm is sold, that there are certain conditions put on planning permits about land use and care of the land.

Stuart GRAINGER: Perhaps an example: the farm that we have is 150 acres. It was subdivided from a bigger property in 2019, I think, just pre COVID. It was an 850-acre holding, which for Macedon Ranges would have been a very productive farm of a decent size and scale. It is now eight holdings on nine titles, all of which are around about 100 acres. Most of those will struggle to be productive, and what we are seeing already is some people are giving up. They bought the land – you know, they were living in the city and thought it was a wonderful idea, and now they are realising that looking after 100 acres is quite hard. You are seeing that land becoming quite neglected, less productive. There are other people having a go, and it has given them an opportunity to buy something they may not have been able to buy. But I think there needs to be a bit more than just looking at acreage when they are determining whether these subdivisions can be made and what the plan is for them to still be productive.

Martha HAYLETT: Just on that point, Donna, about rewarding farmers for sustainable practices, are there a few examples you could share with us on what you think that could look like?

Donna COUTTS: Can you think of any examples, Stuart?

Stuart GRAINGER: I think there are ways that we can be rewarded by telling our story and selling direct to consumers who want to buy produce that is produced in a sustainable way. Unfortunately, not all farmers have had professional careers that give them the skills and what have you to be able to do that, which Donna and I have got. But at the moment I am probably more concerned that they are almost being prejudiced, that no matter what your farming practice you are being lumped in with the lowest common denominator. From what I can see, it is going to be very hard for an individual farmer to prove that they are doing something different. So I think unless you are actually selling direct to consumers and can tell your story to each and every one of those individually, it is going to be quite hard.

Martha HAYLETT: Sorry, I may have missed this because I was just a few minutes late – sorry. I am just wondering how many farmers you represent as a group, and maybe if you could share a little bit more about the stories of those farmers or what they are farming and what they are doing. Are some of them third, fourth, fifth, fifth, sixth generation farmers or are they newer farmers? If you could just share a little bit more about that, that would be great.

Donna COUTTS: In the Macedon Ranges tomorrow night at the Kyneton town hall we are having a gathering of 200 farmers from Macedon Ranges, Hepburn and Bendigo particularly who have changed their practices in the past five years to more sustainably look after the land and be land stewards, so increasing biodiversity, improving pastures, reducing inputs, reducing use of insecticides and herbicides and synthetic fertilisers – that loosely defines regenerative, I suppose – with land sizes from a few hectares to 500–1000 hectares, so significant farms, with cattle, sheep, cropping and pasture hay operations and also a diverse mix of people who have been on those farms or other farms for many generations but also, really pleasingly, a lot of new entrant farmers, who are sometimes the most open to new or different ways of farming.

Stuart GRAINGER: I would say kind of 60, 70 per cent are new entrant farmers.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: And are they young farmers?

Stuart GRAINGER: No, a mix. Some are young, some older. Some, like Donna and me, have had farming backgrounds but have only recently purchased their own farms. It is this quite eclectic group actually, and I think the thing that brought us together has been a program that Macedon Ranges council have sponsored called Healthy Landscapes, where they are literally helping people to learn and deploy more sustainable, holistic animal husbandry practices, which has been fantastic. I was so surprised at how good it has been. I really had a low expectation that something that council were running would be so good, not just from an environmental perspective but from a productivity one as well. It has been fantastic.

Donna COUTTS: The premise of that broad group of courses and that Healthy Landscapes program is that no matter the land size or your experience or how much money you have to invest in the farm, you can actually

make a difference to the health of that landscape. Then that has positive impacts for waterways, the surrounding farmland and the communities that those farmers access as well, so it is a terrific program.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Stuart, I was actually going to ask, but you partially answered my question, what has prompted this interest in regenerative farming. Would it be that council has really ignited the spark, or was it there already and this has just helped to expand it further? What do you think is driving farmers, to both of you, to actually reconsider the old conventional ways?

Stuart GRAINGER: It is funny. I have been involved in agriculture all of my career. My family were big farmers in the UK back to the early 1600s. When we bought the farm that we have got, I had never had cattle before, and it was cattle country. So I started doing some research on best practice grazing, and probably most of the work was actually being done in the US. I thought, 'Blimey, we're going to have to go to the US to go on a course.' Then I saw this thing from the council promoting the Healthy Landscapes course, and I thought, 'We'll give it a go.' And there are a lot of people who have done that; there are quite a few. John, who is not here, had the same sort of farming background, had a professional career and then bought and came back into farming himself. There are a few more traditional farmers, if you like, who have had a shock, either a financial one or a successional one, and they have had to find a lower cost, lower input way of farming. A number have had that kind of epiphany that you sometimes get when you get to later years in life that you just want to care for the environment more, and I think you get less obsessed about using machinery and chemicals and start to get a little bit more holistic in your thinking. But there are as many different motivators as there are people, almost.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Would most of you be using IPM, integrated pest management, as opposed to broad-spectrum spraying or targeted spraying? Do you know if that is part of the regenerative farming for cropping?

Stuart GRAINGER: Most of us are; very few I think are using any kind of herbicide – and very selective use of things like wormers and topical drench applications. Essentially what we are doing as graziers is moving our animals frequently and trying to mimic the herd behaviour that you see on the savanna, and when you move the animals you are not creating the same pest burdens. You are not grazing as selectively; the animals are just having a bit of everything and then moving on, so in fact we almost celebrate weeds, to be honest. Just about everything is palatable. But you do not get this sort of continuous parasitic burden. I have wormed two cows in three years.

Martha HAYLETT: I have just got some questions about the situation with abattoirs in the Macedon Ranges. I have got the issue in my electorate of Ripon where the whole of the Loddon shire does not have an abattoir. The Inglewood one shut down, so it is a huge issue for that whole shire really. But I am just keen to know a little bit more about where your closest abattoirs are or if they have shut down, if you could just share what that situation is for you in that region.

Stuart GRAINGER: The closest one to us is the Kilcoy abattoir at Kyneton. It used to be the Hardwick family; they sold a couple of years ago. That is quite a big abattoir. It does 300 head of cattle and I do not know how many thousands of sheep and goats a day, but it is a lot. To be fair to them, we are not an ideal customer, sending ones and twos and sixes. You know, they built and they have put investment in to do much greater quantities. But all of the small abattoirs are gone because of cost of regulation and competitive forces, and I think part of it is the nature of the supermarket retailer base. The Inglewoods and Daylesfords and what have you that used to service these sorts of local smaller customers have all shut down. It is quite interesting; Donna and I are going over to the UK to a big regenerative farming conference next month. We spoke to a number of aggregated farmer selling groups, and they are all working with abattoirs that are doing 30, 40 cattle a week, versus the Kilcoy 300 a day. It is really hard without that infrastructure. I mean, we try and make it work, but it would be lovely if there was another Inglewood or Daylesford still in operation.

Martha HAYLETT: There have been a lot of people that have said to me that they would love to see mobile abattoirs, like ones that can actually move around and go to the different farms themselves. Is that something that your group has explored or done research on or is advocating for?

Stuart GRAINGER: It is. There are a couple of solutions. There are microabattoirs on farms. I am not sure that is a great solution, because then there are a lot of issues managing that on farm. It is very hard to do it for

other people. Mobile is an option. There is a group who do that, but they take all of the profit pool. It is almost more expensive and higher cost than using an abattoir like Kilcoy. If there were more access to those sorts of facilities, it would only help and possibly put a bit of pressure on the abattoirs to be a bit more flexible. At the moment there is really no option.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Do you talk to the abattoirs as individual farmers or as a collective group?

Stuart GRAINGER: Historically it has been mainly as individual farmers. We have tried to have some discussions collectively, but it has been hard.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: With the bigger abattoir that you are using, what are their thoughts on still engaging with the smaller farmer? Are they receptive to it? Obviously you are still there.

Stuart GRAINGER: They have said their intention is to get out of that sort of work by the end of this year.

Nicole WERNER: With the mobile abattoirs, when you say they take the profit pool, what does that look like?

Donna COUTTS: There is only one licence to operate in Victoria for a mobile abattoir, Provenir, and that model really is that that company is buying the cattle from the farmer at the farm gate. They are processing while parked at that farmer's cattle yards, but it is really buying in paddock. Although the produce is co-branded, it belongs to them. It is a meat company.

Nicole WERNER: So I suppose that is a gap in the market, whereas if there were other licences or other people wanting to go into that, that could be something that sounds like it is preferable to the microabattoirs onsite. I can imagine you would have to jump through a bunch of hoops for that.

Stuart GRAINGER: Well, it is potentially easier to license. They have not found it easy, I think, to get through the Victorian licensing requirements, but you would be better off with three or four mobile ones than 100 on-farm microabattoirs. The only caveat to that is it is a lot easier to do that with lambs than with cattle. With cattle, just the sheer space that you need is a lot more challenging.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: David.

David HODGETT: I was interested in Stuart's comments on the abattoirs, but I think Martha and Nicole have covered off on those. We have had similar discussions around broiler farms in other areas.

Stuart GRAINGER: It is almost impossible to get poultry processed if you want to sell the end product. You can process yourself for your own consumption, but I think there is only one facility in the whole of Victoria now that will do small-scale work with chicken and duck.

Donna COUTTS: Could I make a point, please? It seems such a shame that this is such a stumbling block for chicken as well as beef and lamb, because as farmers who sell direct to customers, we have daily conversations and we could produce so much more meat. There is enormous demand for it; consumers really appreciate what we are doing, how we are farming and the care that goes into it. But to have this major stumbling block seems such a shame when there is growing consumer demand for transparent farming practices and local produce.

Stuart GRAINGER: I think the evidence is almost incontrovertible that having mixed farming systems is the most ecologically sustainable way, with a little bit of cropping, poultry, cattle, lambs. But from a regulatory perspective you are almost forced to only do one thing.

Donna COUTTS: Yes.

Stuart GRAINGER: The two are very much at odds with each other.

David HODGETT: What was it you said you were – I missed it – going to the UK to explore, or something?

Stuart GRAINGER: Yes. There is a large – global – regenerative farming conference called Groundswell over there in late June. We are going over for that, but we are also going to see a couple of businesses that are a lot more established in selling direct from farm to consumer, and they have tackled some of these processing challenges themselves.

David HODGETT: Yes, right.

Donna COUTTS: The UK is experiencing similar consolidation of the abattoir system – small abattoirs closing.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: And without having been there, what are their outcomes – being able to –

Stuart GRAINGER: The two businesses I am most familiar with have been able to partner with small- and medium-scale abattoirs, and they are almost their biggest customers now. They are both processing in the order of 50 to 100 cattle a week. They are locked at the hip with the small abattoir, and I think it is them that keep them going. So I am not sure how we are going to answer or how we are going to solve that, but I am very interested to learn what we can.

Nicole WERNER: I think it is interesting, the international practices that we can glean from, because we were at a co-op this morning which included a dairy farm, and they had mobile milking but also the mini milking shed thing, which they had adopted from somewhere in Europe. Was it the Swiss one, where they would take advantage of the seasons? The cows would travel up and graze as they go, so they are able to move as they go. Are there any other practices in terms of those abattoirs aside from the ones that take smaller volumes – like the mobile, like the micro – that are working elsewhere in the world?

Donna COUTTS: There have been a few examples of models of containerised abattoirs that have been tried, particularly through Scandinavia. The design is really elegant, but there just does not seem to have been a lot of success in making it stack up financially for the people who do that. I think the problem is scale too – a lot of the farmers we are dealing with and our farms are small, and to make that capital investment for your own abattoir just costs too much, so sharing an abattoir or access to a medium-size or mobile abattoir would be better.

Martha HAYLETT: What are you seeing some of the other roadblocks are for your members? To your point earlier that Victoria is the hardest state to do business in in your industry, what do you see as some of those other roadblocks beyond some of that? You were talking about regulatory and abattoirs, but what other roadblocks are your members speaking to you about?

Stuart GRAINGER: I do not know about roadblocks, but certainly one of my observations – and to be honest it comes more from my experience running George Weston Foods than as a farmer – is food and agriculture gets quite lost in the Victorian government system. It is a lot less prevalent than, say, in New Zealand. I think back to COVID, when it literally was a battle to keep factories open, keep food production going, keep food on product shelves. Every day we had a fight with the health departments and what have you, whereas in New Zealand every day we had a couple of people from the department of food and ag helping to fight our corner and make sure that these things were being considered properly.

For me it is not necessarily a roadblock, it is: how can we elevate the importance of food and agriculture, particularly for local people? When I ran George Weston Foods, I used to have someone from a government department come to me every week almost offering to give me money in grants and what have you for export. There was nothing ever for feeding Victorians, but everything was export and innovation oriented. I think if there were more appreciation for what farmers and food producers do, a bit more representation, it would stop this – I mean, everything almost seems to relate to jobs and exports. If we could actually have the importance of feeding Victorians a bit more front and centre, I think a lot of these issues would be resolved a lot quicker.

Martha HAYLETT: Is that predominantly Agriculture Victoria, or is that areas of DEECA? Where are you seeing that there needs to be some work done on better supporting yourselves?

Stuart GRAINGER: I am not sure which department. Most of my dealings have actually been with – they keep changing their name – jobs and economics and programs and precincts or whatever they are.

Martha HAYLETT: DJSIR, yes.

Stuart GRAINGER: But there are very few people you can have a sensible conversation with who understand food and ag. Agriculture Victoria, I think, is very farming-oriented. It is not really whole of supply chain, which is different in other jurisdictions.

Nicole WERNER: That was actually one of the recommendations – I am trying to find it in all my notes – of one of the other witnesses that we heard from: if we could have a minister for someone that looks into food supply from production all the way to the consumer. Yes, that has been heard before.

Stuart GRAINGER: And a senior minister, rather than someone who is buried in someone else's portfolio.

Donna COUTTS: Whether that sits with agriculture or not, it needs to be part of a portfolio.

Nicole WERNER: Yes, and looked at holistically.

Donna COUTTS: I think it is curious that the *Essential Services Act* does not – I mean, it talks about gas supply, for instance, and sewerage, but food is not an essential service or an essential part of something that government seem to be prioritising. If it was an essential service, food supply, perhaps that would give government power to direct PrimeSafe or whatever is required at the time to secure food supply.

Stuart GRAINGER: It probably does not help either – and I am saying this on the record, but I probably should not – that I think for some while the Victorian Farmers Federation has been a bit dysfunctional. They do seem to be having a good go at getting back and operating properly. One of our members has actually gone on the board, and I think she will give it a good go. But there has been relatively poor representation coming upwards and I do not think anybody sensible really to talk to and champion the cause in government. The two together have been not a great combination.

Nicole WERNER: I might just table here – I found the notes on it – it was Dr Rachel Carey from the University of Melbourne with a specialty in this area. She was talking about whole-of-government food security. She gave us examples of Scotland's good food Act, where there is a portfolio for food, for production, all the way to consumption, and looks at the human right of food – so to your point about essential services, that it should be included as one. Then she pointed to the US, where there is a Secretary of Agriculture and agribusiness, which goes beyond production into food as well, and to the UK and Canada. So I think there are certainly models for it overseas that you could continue to advocate for.

Stuart GRAINGER: It was interesting through COVID. The New Zealand government had done all of that work on the essentiality of the different bits of the supply chain pre COVID. So when we were having discussions, it was: 'Oh, yes, no we know that's really important, and we can't let that fall over.' I am not sure the same thing exists in Victoria.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Are there other states that are doing it better than us? I know you say that the hoops and the cost of jumping through all the red tape here in Victoria are rather difficult. What other states are doing it better than us?

Stuart GRAINGER: Most of my experience is in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. I think New Zealand and Queensland are just a bit easier to do business with. The regulators will work with you. The regulators here in Victoria seem to have become more and more oppositional. I assume there is some sort of directive that sits behind that; I do not think they have just done it on their own. It might just be that we have got better connections in New South Wales and in Queensland as well. Sometimes that helps. But I think there is more of an appetite to work with businesses and almost less of an assumption that businesses are out to do bad things, if that is not too strong a thing to say.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Talking about the Macedon Ranges, obviously bigger farms that have been divvied up now are smaller farms. Is that the way that you see farming going? You might have your superfarms around the state, but then around local municipalities you might have these smaller farms like you have, so there might be more farmer groups dotted around the state.

Donna COUTTS: I think that the consolidation is certainly further out than our commuter belt shires, like Macedon Ranges. So through the Wimmera and Mallee farms are consolidating rather than being cut up. I

think it is our proximity to Melbourne and the land prices that are causing farms to be cut into smaller portions. That actually gives us an incredible opportunity in our area, because there are new people coming to the area, there is population growth and we have an opportunity to be sort of best practice in our area for new approaches to farming and food production and direct-to-market food production. Does that answer your question, Martin?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes. Following on from that, we have heard from a lot of other people that have sat down too – the transport industry trying to get your produce from your farm to wherever it has got to go. Are there issues out your way with that, whether it be the state of the roads or not being able to get the haulage people to come and get your produce, or are you taking it yourself?

Donna COUTTS: We do a lot of our own, where regulations allow. We transport our own livestock and food to consumers. I suppose our area is quite well serviced by cold chain logistics because of the density of population, and in a town like Kyneton there are a lot of restaurants, a lot of tourists. We are on the route of cold chain companies, I suppose. We are quite well serviced and we are not remote.

Stuart GRAINGER: Yes, I do not think that is our biggest worry by a way. Just coming back to the size of the holdings, I think it is probably less important the absolute size; more important is the nature of the holding so it still allows a productive enterprise. Almost the value that is being ascribed to these blocks is more of a problem, I think, than the size, because if you are paying \$2 million for a 100-acre block of land, which is roughly what it is around us, and you are paying a tick under \$2 million to put a house on it, you are probably not that interested in farming it properly, to be honest. That is 100 acres that is never going to be farmed productively then, potentially.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I am aware of our timeframe. Are there any other questions that the committee has at all?

Daniela DE MARTINO: Yes. Sorry, I was just going to ask: what was your experience with seeking permits and purchasing the land that you have now for farming? Was that an easy task, or was it quite difficult, onerous?

Donna COUTTS: My farm is more than 100 acres and farm zoned, but it did not have a house on it. I actually did not have any difficulty getting a planning permit for a house, and we have committed to continue farming and being productive on that land. I personally have not had difficulty.

Stuart GRAINGER: We are similar I guess. We did not do the subdivision, so I have no idea whether that was difficult or hard. Hopefully it was very difficult. But the only difference is we are a rural living zoned, which I think means that I cannot do some of the things that you can do, like selling produce direct from the farm door. We have got some environmental overlays as well as part of that, but that is probably right given where we are. It is a beautiful piece of the world that should stay that way. But it is a bit silly that we have got two farms that are almost identical – Donna can sell; I cannot.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Interesting.

Martha HAYLETT: I have just got one last one, and you have touched on some of it, especially with that point around land banking. We are hearing that quite a lot actually. But I am just keen to hear a bit more about what opportunities and challenges you see our rapidly growing population is causing the agricultural industry in your neck of the woods.

Donna COUTTS: I think one way to make the most of productive farmland holdings that are smaller in size is to intensify operations – not to be an industrial farming site but to have more different animals, horticulture –

Stuart GRAINGER: More income streams.

Donna COUTTS: Yes, income streams. But affordable housing in our area is a big issue. If we really wanted to be incredibly productive – our farm is 47 hectares – we could have several businesses on that farm and produce an enormous amount of food. But who would work on that farm? And if we did find workers, where would they live? They cannot afford to rent a house in any town in our shire on a farm worker's wage.

Stuart GRAINGER: I would love to have a part-time person come and help me out, because I have got other jobs and what have you that I do. But it just terrifies me, the amount of red tape and regulation, and then where would you put them? It is not even a question I am even thinking about.

Donna COUTTS: So lack of affordable housing for farm workers –

Stuart GRAINGER: And I think just to be easier to employ people.

Martha HAYLETT: What are your members doing during harvest? I know a lot of farmers in my district put up caravans on their farms or they just have some sort of temporary housing. But what are your members doing?

Stuart GRAINGER: Most of our members are cattle and sheep farmers, so there is not that period where you have to have that rapid expansion. For shearing it can be quite hard. It is getting harder and harder to find shearers.

Donna COUTTS: You cannot find shearers.

Martha HAYLETT: It can be hard to find shearers, yes.

Stuart GRAINGER: But we do not have that same demand as, let us say, fruit picking or what have you. We have got some associate winery-type people. I think they struggle a bit more, but I do not know how they overcome that.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Our 45 minutes has flown. On behalf of the committee here, Stuart and Donna, thank you very much for coming in and presenting and answering our questions.

Witnesses withdrew.