

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply

Geelong – Tuesday 21 May 2024

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

WITNESS

Andrew Etherton.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearing in Geelong. I will run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you 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 time to meet with the committee today. Our committee consists of Jordan Crugnale, the Member for Bass; Martha Haylett, the Member for Ripon; I am Juliana Addison, the Member for Wendouree; Martin Cameron, the Member for Morwell; Nicole Werner, the Member for Warrandyte and David Hodgett, the Member for Croydon.

Please introduce yourself and tell us about your position.

Andrew ETHERTON: Hi. My name is Andrew Etherton. I am a Lecturer on farming systems at Marcus Oldham College, which is a private college based here in Waurn Ponds in Geelong.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Would you like to make some opening remarks?

Andrew ETHERTON: My interest is in providing additional feedback on some issues and to give an idea of some of the challenges we have as an agricultural college and just some of the day-to-day issues we have had as urban encroachment has incurred to the college. We run around 200 hectares on the outskirts of Geelong, and it is now creating some challenges for us just with trying to extend agricultural education for what we do.

The CHAIR: Excellent, that is great. I will start and say thank you so much for being here. Just for Hansard and to make sure that we have all got a really good understanding, can you tell us about the students that the college attracts? Are they aspiring to take over the family farm or looking to start new farming business? What do their career paths look like when they begin?

Andrew ETHERTON: We have students that come from all states and territories across Australia. The majority of the students that complete the agriculture course end up managing or running their own family properties. Students who study the agribusiness course generally end up in post-farmgate, such as value-adding, banking, finance or real estate, or in service industries such as the AWI or those sorts of businesses, post-farmgate. As I said, the students are from every state and territory across Australia, and the current spread is agribusiness has about 25 per cent females and the agriculture course has about 12 to 15 per cent females.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Martin, would you like to kick off?

Martin CAMERON: Is it a lot of kids that are coming from a farming background, or is it outside the box, where it is just a passion of theirs and they are not off the land, so to speak?

Andrew ETHERTON: About 95 per cent-ish of students would come from a farming background, with the other 5 per cent from urban backgrounds. Pre-entry requirements for Marcus Oldham compared to other traditional universities are that students are required to have one to two years of post-year 12 work experience on a farm in Australia, so pretty much every student that comes to the college has an idea they want to be in agriculture. Our dropout rate in first year is negligible; one to two students out of a cohort of 80 might drop out in their first year, compared to some of the other universities that might be in serious double-figure areas.

Martin CAMERON: For what we have been looking at – the urban sprawl as we march out from our regional centres and our inner city, as we push out into our landscape – we are looking at the protection of the food bowl. But for you to be here, and the impact that it is actually having on the school as such where you are educating everyone that is going to be working in that environment; what are the challenges that you have got

there as we march out towards where your 200 hectares that you have at the school – it was probably well protected five to 10 years ago, and now they are on your doorstep?

Andrew ETHERTON: Sure, a number of the issues – just one I have been involved in in the last few weeks was access for machinery, bringing machinery in to cultivate paddocks, spray paddocks and seed paddocks. We share a driveway with Geelong Christian College, so we actually have to drive through a school to access us. Access – we are somewhat landlocked, so our only access is up Pigdons Road, which requires bringing machinery, including harvesters, field bins, seeders et cetera past Deakin University, past Epworth hospital, and trying to get in a side gate where possible in amongst cars, buses et cetera. That has probably been one of the biggest challenges, simply getting equipment into the property. The other one probably we have seen with urban encroachment is the incursion of vermin animals, particularly rabbits, and the ability to actually control them easily without flow-on effects down the food chain. If we poison rabbits, what might that have if there are domestic dogs? We do have a number of walking tracks near our college, because we adjoin the freeway as well, so there is an issue potentially that poisoned animals may be picked up by domestic dogs and then there is a flow down through the food channel. That is just another issue of being able to control vermin. For instance, we have got a large rabbit and kangaroo population on our college as well.

Martha HAYLETT: How long has the college been there for?

Andrew ETHERTON: Sixty years now. It was a bequest originally for the education of the sons of Protestant farmers. There you go.

Martha HAYLETT: Not those Catholic farmers, just the Protestants.

Andrew ETHERTON: So that is how it came about.

Martha HAYLETT: Right. Thank you very much.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Cubs and Scouts was for Protestants.

Martha HAYLETT: That rules out a lot of people in our electorates.

Andrew ETHERTON: Traditionally there was a very high tie-up between Geelong Grammar, Geelong College, Scotch – Xavier are out, because they are Catholic –

The CHAIR: Melbourne Grammar.

Andrew ETHERTON: Yes, all those Protestant schools. It has obviously changed since then. It is pretty much full residential, so all the students live on campus as well.

The CHAIR: With these challenges from Deakin University, the growth of Waurin Ponds and Armstrong Creek – I remember when I was at uni in the 90s, the people that I knew at Marcus Oldham, generally it was sort of like being out in the sticks of Geelong. Now you are really a part of central Geelong. Has Marcus Oldham considered relocating?

Andrew ETHERTON: No; we just invested \$25 million in a new teaching block four years ago. At the moment we have just invested another \$10 million in a 40-bed accommodation that is hopefully going to be ready by Australia Day next year for our incoming students. Are we thinking of moving? No.

The CHAIR: Not with that investment.

Andrew ETHERTON: No.

Martha HAYLETT: Is there potential to get some other land to then take the students to learn how to do cropping and everything that they need to learn?

Andrew ETHERTON: We do have a lot of strategic alliances with industry groups, particularly such as Incitec Pivot, Riordan Grain and also Southern Farming Systems. We do use their resources a lot; however, we run our timetable very much like a high school, where students are in class 6 hours a day, every day. The ability to get students out for half a day on a bus trip really conflicts with your workload. We do use those resources

where possible, but having it close and handy and the students actually controlling and running the farm, where possible, having some skin in the game, means their teaching and learning outcomes are much better when the students are involved and doing it themselves, rather than just doing it on a piece of paper.

The CHAIR: The demographics of your students have probably changed somewhat in terms of their access to information and stuff. Kids from country schools or living in rural communities have come in. How have their attitudes to farming and innovation changed over recent times in terms of what they are seeing at home, potentially, on properties that they have grown up on, as opposed to these industry experiences they have before they join? How are they looking forward into the future about innovation in farming?

Andrew ETHERTON: The agricultural industry in the last 10 years has been a really good space in regard to great profits. There is a lot of confidence out there and people are willing to invest. Go back to the mid-1990s with high interest rates, low commodity prices, farmers were saving a dollar to make a dollar. Now farmers are spending a dollar to make a dollar, excuse the pun. But people are now investing in equipment, technology and land expansion, and people are now somewhat – and I think this is across all of society – not as averse to risk, particularly taking on debt, as they were perhaps in a previous generation where their parents had come through depressions and world wars. I think the understanding of a farming business now is it is a business not a hobby, and people are now running multimillion-dollar businesses. Even small enterprises have sizeable dollar investments, and people actually appreciate now the equity value of that compared to what it was 40 to 50 years ago, when it was a hand-me-down from Mum and Dad: ‘I really don’t appreciate the value of this.’

The CHAIR: That is very consistent. We met a great dairy farmer and his son from South Gippsland, and they had done that. They had expanded. They had borrowed money to expand when neighbouring farms were available and stuff like that, so that is a consistency. So we are seeing a greater level of, would I say, professionalism in terms of farming?

Andrew ETHERTON: Exactly. The higher top 20 to 50 per cent of farmers are now comfortable talking terminology such as equity, return on investment, return on assets. Previous generations would go, ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about; ask my accountant.’ So the whole industry is really stepping up in regard to its capabilities and understanding of the business and how they are travelling not just from a production point of view but a business point of view, which is great to see, because once again it is a business you are operating, not a hobby.

David HODGETT: On the farmland you use for teaching, the council has made a number of decisions that obviously impact on that, and you have highlighted some of those. Have they given enough weight to what you are doing there, what you are trying to achieve there? You obviously have submitted to some of the decisions.

Andrew ETHERTON: The college certainly does have a land and management committee that involves the board of the panel of the college along with the principal and the vice-principal. There are certainly some issues coming up in regard to looking at subdividing some of the land that the college has. We currently adjoin Epworth in one corner and also Deakin, and there is a parcel of land where a new road goes through. That means we have got a couple of paddocks that are now, I am going to say, offsite from our core block. There may be potential to sell them off, but because they are currently, I believe, classified as agricultural, if the college sells them as commercial, there is a huge tax windfall. I am not fully abreast of how it works, but I know it is somewhat hampering us, say, generating some income to expand our accommodation block. So potentially there are some challenges there. Once again, I am not abreast of it because I am not on the committee. I just really wanted to explain to this committee some of the day-to-day issues that we are seeing in regard to managing equipment and providing feedback in regard to urban encroachment. But certainly it is another challenge I think coming forward that the college, if we do look to subdivide part of the college or parts of the farm out there, may be up for in additional taxes.

Martha HAYLETT: How do you propose to mitigate these issues? Because it is a tricky one, isn’t it, with land lock. You do not necessarily want to purchase new land because then you have got to travel between. What is the college thinking in terms of how you fix this?

Andrew ETHERTON: I think at the moment the college is actually getting an external consultant in to provide a review of that outside the sentimental aspect when someone has been a board or panel member or

staff member for a number of years. As far as I am aware they are using external consultants to provide a fair, equitable and without bias idea of where we should go forward.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Hi, Andrew. I am Jordan, the Member for Bass. Thanks for coming here today. I just wanted to ask: with 80 students coming in each year, what are they talking about in terms of where they see us going? This great new generation of farmers and agribusiness people around technology, climate change and innovation, what are they coming in with – challenges and opportunities?

Andrew ETHERTON: The opportunities are somewhat endless, because we are getting students from cropping backgrounds, sheep, cattle, broadacre, horticulture and dairy, and the automation and technology is where their interest is. They all carry around one of these things in their pocket. The amount of information they can relate to – and get an idea of what equipment is even happening at home or what it is doing at home – by sitting in a classroom is phenomenal nowadays. And we are trying to give students appreciation, even expanding their knowledge further, of what technology can offer for them. While technology is advancing there is still so much more we need to learn. Just making life easier, so work smarter not harder, is what we really try to get students to do. It is not how many hours you might spend driving a tractor, it is looking for that next transformation. Students are looking for that transformational change rather than an incremental 1 or 2 per cent – that big 10 per cent transformational change of driverless tractors or overcoming labour issues, for instance.

Martha HAYLETT: How do you connect your students to employment? Is there a placement aspect of the degree?

Andrew ETHERTON: The agriculture course actually has a 12-month practical placement in the second year of the course. They do 12 months with us learning the theory, they then go and do a 12-month prac placement and then they come back and apply that at a higher level in the agriculture course. The agribusiness course, because it is only a two-year degree, generally only has a 3- to 4-week prac placement, generally in around August each year.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Is the prac anywhere in the country?

Andrew ETHERTON: Anywhere in the country – in fact we have got three students in Canada this year on prac placement and one in Scotland.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Ah, anywhere in the world.

Andrew ETHERTON: Yes. I am actually the second-year coordinator and overseeing that, but I try for the students to look to Australia to do their prac placement, because some of the learnings they get from Canada really are not applicable to Australian agricultural production. It is a great junket to go on, to go to Canada, but at the end of the day it is learning outcomes that I am looking for and what you can apply from your learnings back to an Australian agricultural production system.

The CHAIR: Just drawing on the use of apps to be able to see what is happening on the farm, to be able to look at yield and everything like that, how do you think that this next generation of farmers is going to support securing Victoria's food supply? It is a big question, I know.

Andrew ETHERTON: I think it is relationships – understanding that you are not a grain producer, you are a protein producer, thinking outside your farm gate. You might be a grain producer, but who do you supply? You supply dairy farmers. You need to have a knowledge of how the dairy farmer – I am just using dairy farmers in this instance – uses grain and why they need it in their system. That is where I really encourage students to get outside their comfort zone and understand another industry, so that they can build relationships that are built on an understanding of both parties' needs. If you are talking to a dairy farmer, for instance, and you are a grain producer, it is, 'Why has my grain price gone up \$5?' Or the dairy farmer is going, 'I must have this quality of grain,' rather than just sending down any grain that you have got. So it is building those relationships.

I think, particularly on what I have seen in production, going forward it is going to be about quality, not quantity, particularly – and my background is in grain – as we are becoming even more challenged year on year with lower quality grain, and we are now starting to compete against the Black Sea countries. And because of the freight differential between them and us, that gap, our premium is getting chewed away. My long answer to

a short question is I think it is quality over quantity, and that changes between Victoria and Western Australia. In Victoria we have a huge domestic market, because we have got a lot of mouths here that need feeding. WA, for instance, is a big producer – not enough mouths – so their market is focused exclusively on export. We are very lucky here that we can domestically sell things. It depends on where you are, but certainly for Victoria ‘quality over quantity’ is my answer.

The CHAIR: I am liking this ‘working smarter not harder’, making sure we are getting our yields up and good quality and stuff like that. What could be the role of the Victorian government in supporting this next generation of farmers to get the most out of Victorian ag? Is there a role for the Victorian government to play in terms of support?

Andrew ETHERTON: I think to understand the different tiers. You have got the management level, you have got the services level and then you have got the production level. Now, they are all as equal and as important as one another. It is a systems approach. You cannot work one without the other – somewhat trying to incorporate that. I think AgVic – I am going to call them AgVic; I know they are not called that anymore – are trying to do that with some of their extension activities in conjunction with some of the farming system groups, like Birchip Cropping Group, Riv Plains and Southern Farming Systems, just to name a few. They are trying to get farmers to have a holistic view of their farming systems. You might be really good at the books and be really good at that. But in saying that, I will take a quote from Bill Malcolm from Melbourne Uni, ‘If you need to know the system, you have to be working within the system.’ You cannot be detached. It is once again a holistic approach. I think the Victorian government being part of that through extension groups, local farming systems groups and of course the ag department itself and trying to provide that whole-of-system approach is the way forward. And it is getting farmers to achieve yield potentials, as in what is potentially available for yield and where they are sitting, as in raising the bar and maximising every hectare, every dollar of diesel, every tonne of fertiliser and every kilometre of road transport to maximise efficiency, which in turn will start to then potentially look at reducing wastage such as carbon pollution, for instance, or CO₂ emissions.

Nicole WERNER: We have heard from a few different groups. The Victorian Farmers Federation – is that what they are called?

The CHAIR: Yes, the VFF.

Nicole WERNER: And then there was a group from the Yarra Valley, a group of different people representing farming in their area. They suggested to us there really was kind of a lack of uptake from generation upon generation with people as to their interest in farming. It sounds like you kind of suggest otherwise. What is your view on it?

Andrew ETHERTON: It is very regionalised. There are some areas of the state adopting technology left, right and centre. There are other areas, and there are pockets within regions, that are slow; they are laggards in regard to adopting technology. That can even be down to just local towns. One town will be adopting technology really quickly and one will not be. A lot of that has to do with, I think, the extension and services provided by, say, the local reseller or how active the ag department is or even their local farming systems group might be. Some are really adapting quickly, others are slow. Across the board I would say that there is huge scope to adopt more. The top 5 to 10 per cent are going ahead in leaps and bounds, and then there is a big chunk following that that are progressing but not at the rate that would be seen as possible. To give you an example of that, a technology such as variable-rate technology, such as variable-rate fertiliser or seeding, has been around probably for the best part of 15 years. If you look at the Grains Research and Development Corporation’s national paddock survey, probably less than 10 per cent of farmers are probably adapting that year on year. I think it is almost a fear of the technology. Most of them actually have that technology there. They just have not switched it on.

Nicole WERNER: I think the concern they were expressing was more that their kids are not wanting to take up farming. Certainly VFF said they feel like it is a supply issue for us because it is just not an appealing industry to go into for the people that they see and the family farms that they represent. Is that what you are seeing coming through the college?

Andrew ETHERTON: It is a generational thing. I am originally from north-west Victoria, and just to give you some perspective, the town I grew up in is a town called Rainbow. Of my generation, there is not one

person my age, from my year level, who went home on the farm. That has now flowed on to the next generation. With no-one from my generation, there were no offspring, and hence, there is a big void. For instance, there are now four towns which comprise one football club up there now. So it has been this slow, gradual decline, not just in the last five to 10 but in the last 40 years. I think probably from that time there was a period of high interest rates and low commodity prices, and then the need to get bigger, and a lot of farmers were at that stage going, 'I'm already 50. If I commit, I need to go around for another 15 years, and I just have not got enough energy left to do it again.'

Nicole WERNER: Yes.

The CHAIR: Andrew, I worked in the girls boarding house at Ballarat Clarendon College and we had families from Rainbow and up the Mallee and all of that. I was there for 12 years, and a lot of the kids were coming down and they were wanting to go to Melbourne; they wanted a different life. It is so great to hear that Marcus has got these students coming through who can really see a great future in that.

Andrew ETHERTON: Yes, there is a lot of positivity out there. It is different, but it does vary between towns. For Rainbow for instance, it has almost been swallowed up – people commute an hour and a quarter to Horsham each day for work. It sounds strange, but people do it in Melbourne, so it is sort of that flow-on effect. Horsham has become a big service town at the expense of those smaller towns regionally.

Nicole WERNER: Yes. I think part of what other groups have explained to us is that in terms of the generational effect there would be people where the kids of farmers would see how rough their parents had it, how difficult it was as a career in terms of actually making any money and how much they struggled. So either their parents would tell them not to go into farming or they would decide for themselves they would not want to go into farming. So I suppose to that end, do you think that there is anything that the government can do to make it more appealing to go into farming? I suppose it is a bit of an issue – if there has been this decline over the last 40 years, where will we be in another 40 years?

Andrew ETHERTON: I think it was at an education conference I went to in Canberra last year that I heard that most jobs in agriculture are not actually on a farm, they are actually off the farm. I think often there is that city–country divide, and I think that gap is getting wider because no longer does someone have an uncle or an auntie or a grandfather or grandmother who actually grew up on a farm. That generational gap has really started to drift apart. So for instance, my two kids are the exception in that they have a parent that grew up on a farm, but there is no family farm to go back to anymore for weekends. That divide is getting further and further apart. In saying that, the challenge going forward I think is having the people with the skills and qualifications to actually provide all the services, the inputs and the advice on top of – in addition to – the actual physical production. There is only so much that equipment, technology and people can do in a day. That is where often the problem is that people are just getting to the stage where that is all they can physically do. Which means that I am only achieving, say, 80 per cent yield potential when I could be achieving 95 per cent; I just have not got enough time to tweak that little bit and do it properly.

Overall, promotion of the industry that is not just a farmer with straw hanging out of his mouth, I think is a way forward – the idea that you do not have to be living on a farm in remote areas to be involved in agriculture. Once again, a long answer to a very short question. There are so many opportunities out there, and once again, there are jobs happening in ag that did not even exist five to 10 years ago.

Martha HAYLETT: Andrew, just in your view, do you think agricultural land in Victoria is adequately protected?

Andrew ETHERTON: From mining or conservation?

Martha HAYLETT: As that sprawl comes out, do you think that we are protecting agricultural land enough for it to be sustained into the future? And how do you think the protections might be improved?

Andrew ETHERTON: In my personal opinion, I think it is. My worry is, having spent some time in South Australia, that some of the most productive land is actually going under housing. That is probably my biggest concern. If you look at Werribee for instance, some of that land that is highly, highly productive is actually being swallowed up for –

The CHAIR: Housing.

Andrew ETHERTON: Housing, yes. Whereas other areas, like the Mallee for instance, which is lower producing, are not facing those challenges. That is probably the biggest challenge I see personally. It is that the good land is being lost to housing and we cannot get it back, and the other land that is then remaining does not have that production capability. Then of course within that you have got the neighbouring challenges. I know for ourselves we adjoin Epworth, so we do not like generally spraying any herbicide, fungicide, insecticide or anything next door to a hospital, and even burning on paddocks is an issue for us to control weeds, pests or disease. We need the wind to be blowing in a certain direction to be able to burn off any paddocks or trees or anything like that. They are some of the conflicts that often happen. Getting back to your question, I think land is generally protected. That is my personal opinion anyway.

The CHAIR: Andrew, this is a bit off topic but very interesting to me: in terms of lab-based food production, whether it be plant-based meat products or things that are coming out of a lab, in your experience talking to other educators and talking to your students, how do people feel about this growth of alternative food sources that do not come from the land?

Andrew ETHERTON: At the moment, if you did a SWOT analysis, you would certainly put it in as a potential threat. As for market share, it is still probably less than 5 per cent. My personal thought is in the short term I do not think it is a threat. Down the track it might be a major threat, but in the short term I cannot see it really taking off, because it is still not proven as to the real benefits, apart from the emotional attachment – you are not eating something that was running around in the paddock. The real cost of producing it is – is it going to be any cheaper? I think at the end of the day the consumer votes with their wallet. You will go to Coles and things like that and at the end of the day, when things are really tough, people will vote for what is in – and you will see that when food shortages are on often the organic food is still left there, because it is three times the price of the non-organic. People at the end of the day I think will vote with their wallet, not their heart.

The CHAIR: So talking about you coming from the grain industry and being in agronomy – oat milk, soy milk: what are the future trends? Have you got students coming through where families are producing a lot of soy or stuff like that?

Andrew ETHERTON: We have farmers that do produce those grains. Once again, I think the market share of those is still relatively small, and it is a niche market. Whether it sustains long term, time will tell. Once again, I think to a certain degree it might be a bit of a fad. While the market might be growing for that, the overall market for consumption is also increasing. Even though it might be chewing away at 2 or 3 per cent of the market, the market itself is still growing, so I think there is still an outlet for milk.

The CHAIR: Because we got an incredible stat from our dairy farmers the other day. It used to be 24 billion litres and they have gone down to 18 billion litres, even though the population has grown.

Andrew ETHERTON: Not knowing the dairy industry, is that just because there are less and less farmers out there?

Nicole WERNER: I wrote it down: 12.1 billion litres over the last 24 years of milk production has gone down to 8.1 billion litres.

The CHAIR: I was way out, sorry. It is down by 25 per cent – interesting. But I am really interested in terms of: when we are looking at food supply, what will the role of soy be and what will the role of oat milk be?

Andrew ETHERTON: It might be the plan B. It might be the skim milk you – you always try to have fresh milk in the fridge, but then you have that 1 litre of UHT in the cupboard for when you just have not got to the shops. I think the fresh milk market is going to still be there; it is just how it might look in five to 10 years time. The big worry I have got with, say, the dairy industry and the little bit I know about it is: are we going to actually be self-sufficient in producing enough for what we need? That is probably the biggest worry, because the number of farmers leaving the dairy industry and just going back to beef – it is still dairy-based and they have still got the same infrastructure there in regard to yards and sheds and loading ramps and trucks; it is just they are not milking twice a day. They are still joining cattle; it is just that they are brown cows instead of black-and-white ones. The whole cow numbers are the same; it is just that it is a different industry.

Martin CAMERON: As part of the set-up of the ag school, is there a part of it now that concentrates on the personal wellbeing of the students coming through, like when they are going to be on the land, certain challenges that they are going to have? We hear a lot of stats about farmers that at the end of the day take their own lives because of pressures. Is there a part of your curriculum that deals with that also?

Andrew ETHERTON: There is a certain part. Whilst not a formal part of the teaching, we do get a number of guest speakers to come in. There is a guest speaker from northern New South Wales–Queensland – she falls under the banner of Are You Bugged Mate? where you might be bogged but you can always get someone to help you pull out of that bog. You are never bogged to the extent that you simply leave the tractor or the ute or the car bogged forever and then the unfortunate happens. So we spend a lot of time with that. The students also support another charity in mental health and wellbeing called This Is a Conversation Starter, where they buy really loud, ugly shirts that are devoted to supporting help lines and things like that. So we try to make it very, very up-front, with nothing sort of off-limits, because I think where you are going is that a lot of farmers spend a lot of time by themselves, particularly in tractor cabins or mustering sheep or milking cows. Sometimes if you are by yourself, you cannot just get that weight off your shoulders and sometimes it just becomes too much. I think getting that conversation started – also some of those guest speakers come in and talk about how you approach that, to just simply ask, ‘Are you okay, mate? Don’t be afraid. There’s no embarrassment,’ and often that just gets that conversation started.

Martin CAMERON: Cool. That is excellent.

Andrew ETHERTON: It is becoming more and more up-front, not hidden like when I went through ag college. It was pushed under the carpet, and you would go, ‘Oh, mate, just don’t worry about it. Go and have a beer. You’ll be fine,’ whereas now it is really encouraged that students actually identify other students as well and actually call it – not so much call it out but –

The CHAIR: Check in.

Martin CAMERON: Check on them.

Andrew ETHERTON: ‘You’re not right’ – and get the student counsellor or the vice-principal, who has had some mental health training, to actually go and speak to that student and just see are they okay.

Martin CAMERON: That is just another part of running a farm which is not spoken about. You have bills you have got to pay, and you have got your own personal health that you have got to look after.

Andrew ETHERTON: Yes. And it is so much that resilience. You will get knocked down, but you get back up again. And I think that is where the speaker from Are You Bugged Mate? talks about how there is always someone willing around who can give you a tow or pull you out of that bog and get you back on firm ground again.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I love that. I really love that. That is amazing – when you are spinning your wheels and you are going nowhere and you are getting covered in mud and everything like that, but you do get out eventually. You could be covered in mud, but you cannot do it on your own, often.

Andrew ETHERTON: Exactly. It might not be straightaway. You might need to ask for help from someone to come over with their tractor or their ute or their car and just pull you out of that bog and get you on the road again.

The CHAIR: That is so true. We are out of time. Are there any other final comments? Andrew, was there anything else? We have asked you a lot of questions. It has been like *Hard Quiz*. We have asked you about everything in your sector. Is there anything that you would really like to leave with us as a closing remark?

Andrew ETHERTON: Two things: one, I have loved the opportunity to be part of this, just to be involved. And probably my closing comment is I am probably providing information more from my own background rather than as a representative of the college. I am probably speaking out of school – excuse the pun. But yes, while I work for Marcus Oldham, probably my feedback has been from a personal point of view rather than the college’s aspect, because –

The CHAIR: I am just going to look over to our good secretariat, and we will certainly capture that – as someone with how many decades experience in agriculture?

Andrew ETHERTON: Three decades?

The CHAIR: Three decades – that you have come to speak to us about your experiences as well as your role, but with a lot of it you are not talking on behalf of the college, you are talking on your 30 years experience as well as growing up on a farm.

Andrew ETHERTON: Yes. Fantastic. Okay.

The CHAIR: Very good. Thank you so much.

Committee adjourned.