

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PRODUCTION AND MARKETING  
OF FOODSTUFFS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2005**

**SESSION ONE**

**Members**

**Ms J.A. Radisich (Chairman)  
Mr G.A. Woodhams (Deputy Chairman)  
Mr T.R. Buswell  
Mr M.P. Murray  
Mr D.A. Templeman**

**Co-opted Members**

**Mr P.D. Omodei  
Mr D.T. Redman**

**Hearing commenced at 9.45 am**

**O'BEIRNE, MR TERENCE GERARD**  
**Executive Officer, ChemCert WA, examined:**

**RUTHERFORD, MR PETER ANTHONY**  
**Board Member, ChemCert WA, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Welcome to the Economics and Industry Standing Committee. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand the notes attached to it?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Will you please state the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

**Mr O'Beirne:** I am the executive officer of ChemCert WA.

**Mr Rutherford:** I am the immediate past chairman of ChemCert WA and I am still a member of the WA board.

**The CHAIRMAN:** First, we will get some information from you about ChemCert and the role it plays. We have received and read your submission, which we thank you for. Can you tell us a little more about what you do and your opinions on the matters that we are inquiring into? We will have free-flowing questions throughout our discussion after you have given us some background.

**Mr Rutherford:** ChemCert WA is a non-profit organisation that exists solely for the provision of training for people who wish to apply chemicals - in effect, pesticides - safely and effectively. The organisation was created about 10 or 11 years ago. There are parallel organisations in all states and jurisdictions of Australia. A national board oversees the policy on a national basis; it has no operational role at all. In Western Australia we are constituted by a volunteer board of people who have an interest in the issue. It is dominated by industry people. There are some government people, like me, on the board. Our recently elected chairman is Mr David Gray. He is a manufacturer of pesticides. We have one employee and that is Terry, who is our executive officer. He has an assistant and the two of them provide administration, executive and operational work on behalf of the board. They provide the engine room, as it were, of our operations with trainers. We have a range of trainers. We have private trainers who have their own consultancy businesses. They provide training mainly for farmers as and when they wish on a fee-for-service basis. These private trainers have been attached to ChemCert for the past 10 years in most cases, although they come and go a bit. More recently, we have arranged contracts with some TAFE colleges to provide training using the ChemCert material on a royalty basis. We do not have any role in attracting students or delivering the course; we just provide them with the training material, again, on a fee-for-service basis. In round figures we have provided just over 19 000 people with training over the past 10 or so years. We took six months off our operations a year or two ago to convert our training material from a pre-competency configuration to competency-based training material, which is, most importantly, the assessments. We now offer what we call a basic course - that is not what the

course is called - at Australian quality training framework level 3, which is aimed at people who wish to apply chemicals and who have a decision-making role in what chemicals they will apply and how they will do it. AQTF level 2 is for those people who act just as farmhands or people who apply chemicals totally under instruction and supervision and who have no decision-making role. Level 4 is for a person with a high-level managerial decision-making role or a person who wishes to plan chemical programs. We do not teach at that level. What else can I say, Terry? Fill in the details.

**Mr O'Beirne:** I can tell you a bit about the course itself and the operational side of it. I have the basic manual that Peter has referred to, which the students obtain and work through in a couple of days. They keep that as a reference manual. It describes all the requirements that we mention in the course of delivering the program. The contents of that manual include pest management, the recognition of pests and the economic damage that they may bring about. Risk management is an important factor at all levels, including selecting a chemical, transporting it to the property, applying it, mixing it and storing it. We are trying to build into the program a subconscious area in which the farmers consider a risk in every step of that operation. In doing that, hopefully they will minimise any ill effects or side effects that might occur from the use of chemicals. Labels and MSDSs are very important factors -

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is an MSDS?

**Mr O'Beirne:** It is a material safety data sheet. It accompanies the label that is produced by the manufacturer. In fact, under legislation, an MSDS is required to be provided every time a farmer buys a new chemical. The MSDS is sort of an elaboration of what the label contains; for example, it might have more detailed effects of the chemical under storage or under use. It is an adjunct to the label. It is very important, as well as the label. The label is a legal document. Farmers should not transgress that. Farmers need to be trained to identify sections of the label that might affect their application of the chemical. Legislation, of course, is an important factor. Although the training in Western Australia is voluntary, a code of practice is put out by the Department of Agriculture, which covers some of the legislation that is incorporated in occupational health and safety issues and the transportation and storage of dangerous goods, as well as some voluntary codes of practice. Veterinary chemicals are covered as well. A specific section of the manual is allocated to livestock producers. We are in the process of developing a new animal health program, particularly in relation to lice control, and perhaps incorporating training if chemical mulesing comes about. We think these are important areas that farmers should be trained in.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you give us a list of the chemicals that you train participants in?

**Mr O'Beirne:** The training is a generic factor. We do not go into programs or recommendations. We do not say that Roundup is better than whatever. It is generic. That can be applied to all areas. If a farmer buys any type of chemical, he should know where to look for the chemical name and he should be able to recognise the label heading at the top, which might have S6, poison, keep out of reach of children or whatever. He should be able to understand what that implies.

**The CHAIRMAN:** If not from you, where would those farmers who use chemicals get education about the chemicals?

**Mr O'Beirne:** From commercial areas such as the reseller who sells them the product; for instance, Landmark or Elders. They might get it from private consultants who advise the farmers on crop production or pest control.

**Mr Rutherford:** They could get it from the Department of Agriculture or maybe the local government if individuals were fully trained and so forth.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Or, feasibly, they could not get it at all.

**Mr Rutherford:** That is right.

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**Mr O'Beirne:** Or worse, from their neighbour.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** Do you hook into a web site such as Hazchem or something like that?

**Mr O'Beirne:** The online training has been raised but it has not come about. We do it in a face-to-face situation with a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 farmers. They interact with each other as part of the adult learning process.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** A data sheet is provided when products are purchased, but you do not have a web site that they can access.

**Mr Rutherford:** We have a web site, but it does not have training material on it.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** It would go one step further than the training material; that is, it would have the properties of the chemicals. I am using Hazchem from a different industry as an example. If I want to find out about a chemical, I look at my data sheet.

**Mr Rutherford:** Databases on the Internet provide all the labels, but not on our web site. The Queensland and Victorian databases and the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority database provide that.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** However, they are not directly hooked to your web site.

**Mr Rutherford:** That is right.

**Mr O'Beirne:** We refer to those databases in the manual at a certain time.

**Mr Rutherford:** They are in the manual, so that the farmer can go to them.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** I have spoken with Mr O'Beirne on many occasions in the past. Can you describe the environment that you work in? Would you describe it as a competitive environment, given that other people can provide the same level of information that you do?

**Mr O'Beirne:** We are fairly unique in the sense that we take the stance of being independent. We are a non-profit, non-government organisation. We are there to train farmers in this manner. What they do commercially and what they use commercially is up to them. It is one of the things that our trainers have to be alert to. There is a fine line in a group of farmers asking what they should do when striped rust comes in. We say that they should take the appropriate action, which may well be this, this and this, but for the actual product they would need to get advice from a more qualified person.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** You have been working for the past 10 or so years and I think 19 000 people have been through your course.

**Mr O'Beirne:** In WA, yes.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** How many of those people would be looking to voluntarily repeat with you? How many are seeking re-accreditation?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Not a lot, but it is increasing. What is happening now is that quality assurance programs, such as Freshcare, Cattlecare and SQF 1000 and 2000, are driving farmers to come back, because they need to have evidence of chemical training to qualify for their QA program. We find that that is bringing them back.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is there an expiry on the training that you provide?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Once they have trained, essentially they are qualified for life. However, it is a ChemCert internal recommendation that they come back and do what is called a re-accreditation program. That is after a five-year period. It covers things that may have changed, such as legislation or particular environmental areas in the delivery of the chemical or the machinery that is used for it. Labels may change in five years. We recommend that they come back and do that program, but it is not compulsory.

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**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I understand the importance of the skills that you give primary producers for primary production. I am interested in how the producers use the certifications that you give them in marketing their produce. Do you have any comment on that?

**Mr O'Beirne:** The major factor in that is the safety of the end product, whether it be a carrot or a brussels sprout. The aim is to have minimal or no residue of the chemical in that product. Adhering to the label and being trained to read the label and then administer the chemical correctly will minimise the chance of residues being in the produce that is eventually sold and eaten. I suppose that is the major area.

**Mr Rutherford:** It is important that the farmer understand the risks of using chemicals. That is what we emphasise through the training. There is risk management all through this program. There was another point I was going to make, but it has gone clean out of my head.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** That happens to me all the time!

**Mr O'Beirne:** The other point is the produce production. If there are pests in either the orchard or the crop, the yield is lower; therefore, there is an economic factor as well. Farmers are using chemicals stringently and economically. They certainly incorporate this integrated pest management, which is using things other than chemicals to destroy pests. A simple example of that may be birds as the pest in a vineyard. The farmer would put a net over the vineyard and the netting would be a physical barrier. That is called integrated pest management. Farmers can bring in integrated pest management. Another example of that is using some biological agents. For example, spiders can have a predatory effect on mites in tomato crops. That is becoming a part of farming practice more and more. Using nature and these other areas will minimise chemical usage and reduce the amount of chemicals that farmers purchase and, therefore, hopefully increase farmers' profit rate.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** How do the producers signal to the potential buyers of their product that they are certified through your organisation?

**Mr O'Beirne:** They do not really. The buyers may insist that they have a quality assurance program.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** Do you provide them with a document at the end of the process?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Yes. This is an assessment program. They go through that with the trainer. It is an open book. They can refer to the book. If they are assessed as being competent at those levels, they get a statement of attainment, which is co-badged from ChemCert and our registered training organisation, Curtin University. Farmers come away and they have a certificate or a statement of attainment.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** Who trains the trainer?

**Mr O'Beirne:** That is a good question. We have our internal selection process and we have professional development days for those trainers two or three times a year.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** Where do your trainers come from? What is their general background?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Mostly they have been involved in the farming industry as consultants. I can think of two or three who were graduates of UWA some time ago. They may have worked in the commercial area, either for Elders, ICI or someone like that, and have now branched off on their own. Part of their program is to do this training on a commercial basis.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The figure of approximately 19 000 people whom you have trained over 10 years equates to roughly 2 000 people a year. That seems like a fair number of people, given that there are other training providers. Would you say that the level of education in this field is fairly high among people who work in the industry?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Do you mean their general education?

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**The CHAIRMAN:** I do not mean the level of their education; I mean the number of people who have the certification that you and other providers are providing. Are there many people handling chemicals without these types of qualifications?

**Mr Rutherford:** Yes, I am sure there are. Returning to an earlier question, although there are other training organisations, such as TAFEs and so forth, none of them is particularly active in the pesticide training market. Let us be honest; ChemCert dominates the pesticide training market. Because we are now teaching the competencies, and the competencies have been laid out nationally, there is nothing to stop another organisation coming on board and competing with us for market share. That is fine; we are prepared for that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What do you do that is proactive to recruit people for you to train?

**Mr Rutherford:** Word of mouth and advertising. Everybody out there in farmland knows of ChemCert nowadays. They know, particularly if they go into a quality assurance program, that all the quality assurance programs have a ChemCert accreditation as a prerequisite to becoming accredited under that quality assurance. If they go into Cattlecare or Freshcare, they know that they have to do ChemCert, even if they have not already done it. They have to remain current with ChemCert, which means doing the refresher program every five years. As Terry said, we would like those numbers to pick up, and they are picking up, although we have a way to go yet. Bearing in mind that it is a voluntary program, there is no mandatory regulation at this point that pushes them into training.

**Mr O'Beirne:** There are a couple of other factors. It demonstrates that farmers have a responsible attitude to chemical usage and the end products that they produce. They are looking for training. They talk to their neighbours. That great fount of knowledge, the *Country Hour* program, is sometimes used and various things like that. We do PR. Frankly, if the course was not acceptable to farmers, you know what farmers are like; they would tell each other down the pub or their neighbours and they would not accept it. The fact that 20 000 people have come back indicates that it is a pretty -

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** You have just explained acceptance. Compliance is another thing. Is any testing done after the course to determine whether they have complied with the suggested area? I know that in earlier times, people would have half a drum of this left and half a drum of that left and then pour it into the one drum and have a completely new chemical. One person I know, who has hair that is greyer than mine, just recently had a heart attack. Everyone blames it on the chemicals that he mixed for his product. Is any testing done at the end to determine whether there has been compliance and that it is not just a certificate on the wall?

**Mr O'Beirne:** That is a very pertinent question. In this training we are trying to change the behaviour from that mixing. It is difficult to monitor it afterwards. One way that has been suggested is an on-farm assessment, but the logistics and the cost of doing that would be extraordinarily high and would be borne probably by the farmer in the end.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** There is no random check in WA.

**Mr O'Beirne:** No.

**Mr Rutherford:** To answer that further, the Department of Health runs a fruit and vegetable pesticide monitoring survey every couple of years. That indirectly provides a means by which farmers' understanding of the risks of using chemicals in relation to withholding periods and residues on the crop can be managed.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think one is due out later this year. I think it might have brought it forward.

**Mr Rutherford:** I also point out that when ChemCert WA first started 10 years ago, after a couple of years of operations, we engaged the services of a research group at Curtin University to do attitude and awareness surveys of our then database of farmers who had done the course. There

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were only 2 000 or 3 000 people at that point. It was raised at our most recent board meeting that maybe we should have another look at that. It is on our to-do list; that is, at some stage in the future we should engage some professional organisation to test awareness and see whether there are any differences between farmers who have not been trained and those who have.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I want to explore a little further the labelling of imported foodstuffs and the way that can develop, or be seen to develop, a non-price competitive advantage for Western Australian producers. There are two aspects. I note that in your submission you referred to the monitoring of imported foodstuffs for chemical residue and biological contamination. Are you aware that that happens now? One of the recommendations of this committee is for a public awareness campaign and an increase in the resources of a “made in WA” type campaign. Can you comment on what you are doing with your producers, and in particular on the residue analysis of imported foodstuffs?

**Mr Rutherford:** I have already alluded to the Department of Health’s residue monitoring survey, which it does every now and again. I am not an expert on this side of things, but I understand that AQIS conducts import food surveys. I do not know what the percentage is.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think it might be about five per cent.

**Mr Rutherford:** Five per cent is the figure I had in my head, but I was not certain enough to bring it up. I do not know whether the strength of that compares with our WA monitoring. I do not know that anybody has compared the two, unless the health department is doing that at present. I do not know.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I have heard stories about the types of fertiliser residue found on brussels sprouts, for example - not that there is a relationship between the two! It seems to me that if a regular monitoring program is done, this sort of information can be readily available to members of the public. There are a lot of natural competitive advantages for producers who fall under a “made in WA” type banner and this “clean, green” term that is used for Western Australian producers who utilise services such as yours for accreditation. Do you see that as a logical direction?

**Mr Rutherford:** Yes, I think that is true. From the farmers’ point of view, we see ChemCert’s role at the decision-making end of the process of using the chemical. We want farmers to use it responsibly and effectively and as little as they can get away with, commensurate with good pest control. Training is a very good risk management tool to minimise the overall risk of pesticide use, whether it be for occupational health, environmental health or food residue. We operate at the operational and decision-making end, but we do not think ChemCert has a specific role to monitor the output end. We think there is an important role for somebody to try to draw those linkages.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I hear what you are saying. You are saying that for farmers to engage in certification-type activities, risk factors, as well as the economic factors that govern it, would drive them. As you have indicated, part of that would be to reduce the cost of production, which I understand. The part I am more interested in is ensuring that if they engage in that process, there is a marketing advantage for them as it pertains to selling their products within Western Australia. That is where I see the great strength of Buy WA and imported food labelling.

**Mr Rutherford:** Absolutely, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** How much does it cost to engage in one of your courses?

**Mr O’Beirne:** The basic course, or what we call risk management in chemical use, is a two-day course. It is scheduled for 20 hours under the VET scheme. That costs a farmer \$360-odd. Since last February, 50 per cent of that has been funded by FarmBis. FarmBis is a combination of federal and state money to help farmers train in various ways in finance or management, but it does fund the basic ChemCert course.

[10.15 am]

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**The CHAIRMAN:** What about the one above the basic course?

**Mr O'Beirne:** That is the re-accreditation. FarmBis does not fund that, because it says that once a person has been trained, it does not think it should fund that again.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is the cost of the re-accreditation about the same?

**Mr O'Beirne:** No. It is a one-day course, and it costs \$250.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are your courses provided in any other languages?

**Mr O'Beirne:** No. However, South Australia has developed a ChemCert course in Vietnamese, and it is taught by a Vietnamese person who is a recognised trainer in South Australia and is also a horticulturalist. We have brought him over here on one or two occasions to specifically deliver training to about 40 Vietnamese people in Wanneroo and about 30 or 40 in Carnarvon. A real problem is getting the message to people from a non-English speaking background.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are your training materials provided in any other language?

**Mr O'Beirne:** No, other than the South Australian version.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is there a manual in Vietnamese?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that available here on request?

**Mr Rutherford:** We can get it if we have to. I must point out that pesticide labels are not printed in any language other than English, so we feel it is important to maintain the training in English, where possible. Where there is a language difficulty, particularly in the case of the Vietnamese, we provide the language training. However, we cannot provide a Vietnamese language label, because that is not how the labels come.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you think there are any other groups of farmers in Western Australia from a non-English speaking background who would benefit from receiving training in their native language?

**Mr O'Beirne:** I would think so, yes; for example, Cambodians, or recent arrivals from wherever, such as Italians or Portuguese. In Geraldton there used to be a big tomato growing effort by Italian and Portuguese people.

**Mr Rutherford:** I would have thought that a lot of those European peoples have been in Western Australia long enough by now for the current crop of growers to understand English reasonably well. I am talking about generational change. I do not know that they are prone to the same problems as the Vietnamese or the other more recent Asian arrivals. That is a problem faced by all state jurisdictions, not just Western Australia.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** This may sound like a semi-loaded question, but do either of you get the impression that people are doing the course simply because there is a perceived compulsion to have this certification because the state or federal government has gone over the top and said that farmers must do the course otherwise they are out?

**Mr Rutherford:** I guess there will always be some people who will take that view, but we would like to think that the vast majority of the 19 000 people whom we have trained have done so because they can see the benefits in the training per se and want to decrease their level of risk and increase their level of understanding of a major farm input. I am sure the majority would think like that, but we cannot say that there are not any others who are doing it just because they feel they have to.

**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** What percentage of the people involved in primary industry production in Western Australia does that 19 000 represent?

**Mr Rutherford:** Who would need training?

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**Mr G.A. WOODHAMS:** The absolute total. Do you have any idea?

**Mr O'Beirne:** It would only be a guesstimate, because the Bureau of Statistics does not have that information any more. We reckon that there are about 35 000 farmers or people working on farms. An important factors coming up now is itinerant workers, such as people who jump off a surfboard and want to do a bit of spraying at Margaret River. This is a real issue. Those people should be trained. We have a special type of manual for those people. They do not get a statement of attainment; they get a letter of attendance. However, it does equip them to apply chemicals under supervision.

**Mr Rutherford:** That is a level 2 course.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It would be a bold farmer, surely, who would grab someone wearing surf gear to look after his crop - without any training!

**Mr O'Beirne:** It is often a matter of necessity. They cannot get people to do it.

**Mr Rutherford:** I should point out that of that 19 000-odd, a proportion are not farmers. We offer the course to anyone who wants to learn how to apply chemicals. For example, the Department of Agriculture staff have to do the course in order to handle chemicals internally. Local government staff, parks and gardens people and turf people - all those sorts of people - do this sort of training as well.

**Mr O'Beirne:** We have a pretty comprehensive database that covers these 19 000 people. This is a pie chart showing last year's participants by farm type. This has come out of our database. Last year, of the 1 640 people who participated, the vineyard sector accounted for 14 per cent; broadacre sheep and cropping was 27 per cent; cattle was 11 per cent; contracting was four per cent; dairy - this may be a reflection on the dairy industry - was one per cent; government was eight per cent; fruit was 12 per cent; horticulture was nine per cent; sheep was two per cent; nursery was one per cent; student was eight per cent; and vegetables was 11 per cent. There is a broad acceptance by all types of production. Similarly we have a pie chart that shows in what statistical area it is. Again, it is a pretty even penetration.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would you be kind enough to table those documents so that we can incorporate them into our materials?

**Mr O'Beirne:** Sure.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much.

**Mr Rutherford:** In addition to farmers, shire workers and other people, we have for the past few years offered the course through the agricultural colleges to year 10 and 11 students at Narrogin, Morawa, Denmark and so forth. Initially they did the level 3 course, but they are now switching to the level 2 course because it is a bit less arduous for them at that level of their education. In our view, as time goes on the vast majority of students who come out of an agricultural college will be ChemCert accredited and will have done that basic training, and that will help them as they move into the farming industry.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much for your time today. We appreciate your input. If you remember anything later that you would like to tell us, feel free to jot it down and pass it through to Karen, and we will gladly receive it. We will certainly feel free to ask you any further questions should we think of them.

**Hearing concluded at 10.22 am**

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