

Submission

No 50

INQUIRY INTO THE UTILISATION OF RAIL CORRIDORS

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Committee Chair, Committee on Transport and Infrastructure
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Inquiry into utilisation of rail corridors

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the inquiry. On behalf of Ms Gaye Hart AM, Chair of RDA Hunter, I submit the following for consideration by the Committee.

RDA Hunter's submission is focused on a regional view of the issues associated with rail corridors as they impact on:

- Connectivity of communities; and
- Projects to maximise productivity.

Connectivity of communities

Trains have always been associated with the expansion of cities and an increasingly mobile workforce.

According to 2006 Census figures, 82% of the population of NSW lives in the urban corridor between the Hunter and the Illawarra. The Hunter needs to be included in State and National visions to provide linkages of major population areas along the east coast of Australia.

By 2031, the population of the Hunter is expected to increase by at least 160,000 people. Integrated plans will be required to ensure these additional residents have the opportunity to live in locations that are close to jobs and/or close to transport options to reduce daily travel times. Connectivity between labour and employment is critical to driving the Hunter economy. Fast, efficient and affordable transportation corridors and connectivity between centres within the Region will be increasingly important to achieving improved productivity.

The NSW Government can lead the way by strategically funding rail and reserve land corridors to:

- Reduce train travel times between
 - Newcastle and Sydney;
 - Newcastle and Brisbane (via Gloucester); and
 - Newcastle and Werris Creek (and on to New England and the Namoi Valley).
- Support construction of a very fast train link between Melbourne and Brisbane.
 - RDA Hunter is a supporter of an east coast High Speed Rail Network, with the Newcastle via Sydney to Canberra stages the first to be constructed.
- Provide alternative, (i.e. rail or light rail), connections to Newcastle Airport; the fastest growing regional airport in NSW.

Identification and protection of transport corridors, especially rail corridors, to better connect the current and future communities of the Hunter to each other, the rest of NSW and Australia as well as the world, will support the State's economy by delivering benefits, which include:

- Better coordination and integration of infrastructure and housing developments;
- Industry development and economic diversification; and
- Job creation opportunities to support growth industries.

Reduced rail travel times between communities will deliver:

- Improved productivity;
- Lower congestion on roads;
- Increased tourism with a better visitor experience; and
- Enhanced freight capacity.

Rail carries freight as well as passengers. The logistical challenges to meet the needs of both sets of customers mean that planning, financing and building the necessary infrastructure for an effective rail system will be a key future challenge not only for the Region, but also for the State and the Nation.

Projects to maximise productivity

The Hunter's location on Australia's eastern seaboard, between Melbourne and Brisbane, and two hours' drive from Sydney offers competitive advantages in accessing Australian and international markets. The region's transport infrastructure contributes significantly to the capacity to drive the benefits of this edge.

Infrastructure Australia recognises that Australia's trade performance can be improved by cutting the cost of moving goods and bulk commodities through ports and airports, and related logistics chains. This is a major challenge for the Hunter. Newcastle Port is one of the largest coal exporting ports in the world and one of the busiest ports in Australia. Newcastle Airport has more than one million passenger movements each year, making it the tenth busiest airport in Australia.

With double the freight movements and at least 25% more passengers in the Region by 2031, congestion around these major national and international gateways will intensify.

Capacity issues impact on the ability to meet throughput and storage requirements of coal and other commodities on Kooragang Island and Carrington. The number of trains arriving at these facilities has progressively increased, as has the time trains are spending on the departure tracks. This causes congestion and "the potential for unloading activities to be compromised by the lack of a suitable departure track to feed onto." (p13 ARTC 2011-2020 Hunter Valley Corridor Capacity Strategy Consultation Document March 2011)

The provision of a rail freight bypass of inner Newcastle will be of strategic importance for the future, as identified in the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy.

At present all rail, freight and passenger, from north, south and west of Newcastle is carried over the existing network through the Newcastle urban areas. Along this track are several level crossings that increasingly frustrate and annoy locals.

The Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) North–South Corridor Strategy, (February 2005), identified the Fassifern to Hexham link, as a bypass of urban Newcastle. The latest HV Corridor Capacity Strategy “...recommends the construction of 3 holding tracks at Hexham. (with) an increasing justification for a fourth holding track.” (p14 *ibid*) Further improvements to both the commuter and freight experiences will flow from the provision of adequate space to hold freight trains around Fassifern.

This bypass will also support the diversification strategy for the Port of Newcastle and proposed developments on the former BHP steelworks site.

RDA Hunter advocates the identification of the corridor for the Newcastle Rail Freight Bypass and protection of this corridor to enable construction.

In summary

RDA Hunter in *Connecting the Hunter, Issues Paper No.1 A regional approach to infrastructure* (Dec2010) identified the following critical short-term freight and transport priorities:

- Securing north-south and east-west corridors for future rail capacity expansion;
- Acquiring land for road and rail expansion;
- Improving land, sea and air links to Newcastle Port; and
- Developing the case for High Speed Rail between Newcastle and Sydney.

Yours sincerely

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