

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

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Subject:

Summary

**Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4
Inquiry on Pacific Highway Upgrades**

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NSW Farmers' Association Background

The NSW Farmer's Association (the Association) is Australia's largest State farmer organisation representing the interests of over 13,000 farmers – ranging from broad acre, meat, wool and grain producers, to more specialised producers in the horticulture, egg, pork, oyster and goat industries.

Executive Summary

The NSW Farmers' Association is requesting the immediate withdrawal of the proposed extended Tintenbar to Ewingsdale (T2E) highway upgrade Study Area. The Study Area should return to that originally under consideration, being largely along the existing Pacific Highway.

There are serious economic and environmental flaws in the RTA's decision to extend its Tintenbar to Ewingsdale Pacific Highway Upgrade Study Area eastward into the northern end of the Cumbalum ridge and the Newrybar Valley.

On behalf of its members and the effected farming community, the Association would like to specifically address the impact of the highway upgrade on prime agricultural land in the expanded study area (section 1d in the Terms of Reference).

The inquiry should note the findings of Northern Rivers Farmland Protection Project, which seeks to protect important farmland from urban and rural residential development by mapping State and Regional Significant Farmland and developing planning principals. Undertaken by the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR), the project is now completed and will become part of the Far North Coast Strategy (expected to be completed in late 2005). This Strategy will supercede the Section 117 Direction under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act.

All farms in the expanded study area have been mapped as State or Regionally Significant Farmland and the project states :

'Public infrastructure is permitted on land mapped as State or Regionally significant where no feasible alternative is available. Councils or State agencies proposing public infrastructure on such land should select alternative sites where possible'.

There is a feasible alternative for the T2E upgrade, given the T2E section of highway from Knockrow to the Bangalow overpass is already zoned 9A for highway upgrade and some land has been acquired in the southern corridor. Consequently, there is no need for the investigative and consultative processes currently underway.

The Association would also like to express its concern that the farming community were not consulted or given sufficient reason for extending the study area.

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1. The Potential Impact of the Upgraded Highway on Prime Agricultural Land in the Expanded Study Area

Cattle, sugar cane, horticulture and value-adding farming enterprises in the expanded study are operating on State or Regionally Significant Farmland as identified in the Northern Rivers Farmland Protection Project.

This project aims to protect prime agricultural farmland from urban and rural residential development by mapping State and Regional Significant Farmland and developing planning principals.

Prime agricultural land such as that in the expanded study area is a precious resource that is under increasing development pressure, particularly in the far north coast region. A great deal of good agricultural land in this area has already been lost to urban and rural residential development. This is having a significant impact on the economic and social value of agriculture in the region.

Any highway upgrade east of the existing highway will remove more prime agricultural land and destroy the lives of rural families, some of which have been farming in the area for three generations. There are three case studies accompanying this submission that demonstrate the potential impact of a new highway through the extended study area.

In the case of the T2E upgrade, there is a feasible alternative that would prevent the further destruction of prime agricultural land. It is along the existing Pacific Highway route, where land is already zoned 9a for highway upgrade and some land has been acquired for this purpose.

In terms of the agriculture's economic contribution in the expanded area:

Beef Production: Beef production in the expanded study area is estimated to contribute up to \$10 million annually to the local economy. It is a unique area for beef production with high rainfall, nutritious pastures and good access to local and export markets. One farming operation in particular, which has been owned by the Jarrett family since 1907, is a vital drought proofing and cattle management link for a family enterprise that comprises 1500 head of cattle. This farm will be devastated by any upgrade through the extended study area and the region will lose an important part of the beef industry on the far north coast. Gary and Donna Jarrett offer cattle management and marketing services and 110 farmers in the region depend on this expertise and industry knowledge.

Cropping/horticulture: Given the large diversity of horticultural crops in the Northern Rivers region, it is difficult to quantify the value of horticulture in the expanded study area. Much of the extended study area is under Macadamias, which contribute more than \$30 million to the Far North Coast region. Other crops include coffee, stone fruit and bush foods. Given the high rainfall, warm climate and State Significant soils, farming country in the expanded study area is widely recognised as a prime horticultural zone, which is heavily involved in value adding on-farm and export markets. Value adding farming enterprises such as Zentveld's Coffee and Brook Farm stimulate the local economy and enhance associated local industries such as tourism and hospitality.

Social Contribution: Local farmers make up the majority of members of Land Care groups, and many are involved in land and water conservation works. The local farming

community also contributes to local agricultural shows and is also a key part of local farmer markets that stimulate the local economy and attract tourists.

Property values: In addition to agriculture, properties in the areas generally derive much of their value from their tranquil, undeveloped setting and from their expansive views. As a result, the intrusion of a major highway development will have a very significant impact on their value. In those cases where the owners have developed tourist or recreational based businesses on their land, the impact on their businesses and livelihoods will be severe. Their life savings, invested like many Australians in their home and property, will be lost in the massive shift in property values caused by this change in RTA plans. Residents would suffer severe visual and noise impacts but, as the route would not actually pass through their land, they would not receive any compensation for resumption of their land and related loss.

2. The Study Area

No reason was given for the extension other than it resulting from "community consultation" and the fact that the RTA had determined that there were "feasible routes" in the coastal region. In other words, the RTA had received complaints from people living near the existing highway asking for the road to be moved east, and the RTA had determined that it might be possible to build a road in the east. There was no suggestion that the extension in any way resulted from the discovery of new or previously unknown obstacles to upgrading the road through the original study area, consistent with the past 12 years of RTA planning and advice to the community.

The RTA did not discuss extending the study area with either of the affected councils (Ballina and Byron) nor did it consult with the affected communities in any way prior to making the announcement.

A coastal route would mean that the upgraded road would pass up to 4km east of the existing highway corridor, rendering irrelevant all other previous RTA upgrade planning in the area and completing a gross deception of the local community as to route of the future upgrade.

All RTA statements and actions for at least the last 12 years have clearly and consistently indicated that the highway upgrade would follow an escarpment route. All of those statements and actions were inconsistent with any coastal route for the upgrade:

- The upgrade route planned with the Bangalow bypass largely follows the existing highway;
- The Ballina bypass route brings the highway up onto the escarpment at its southernmost point near to the route of the existing highway;
- The Bangalow to Ewingsdale planned upgrade commences at the northern end of the Bangalow bypass and follows or replicates the route of the existing highway.

3. Environmental Considerations

Constructing a highway through identified wetlands along the bottom of the Newrybar escarpment and then cutting up through the escarpment at Coopers Shoot will destroy areas of high conservation value which have been identified by Byron Council in the documents, Biodiversity Strategy, Sept 2004 and Byron Flora and Fauna Study 1999. Constructing a highway through these areas is a contradiction to one of the stated objectives of the Environmental Planning and assessment Act 1979 (NSW).

The objective in S5(a) is to encourage 'the protection of the environment, including the protection and conservation of native animals and plants, including threatened species, populations and ecological communities, and their habitats'

Biodiversity plays a major role in an Integrated Pest Management program. Like the Byron farms on the Plateau, the Newrybar Swamp farmers have undertaken extensive tree planting and reforestation projects which are now functioning as significant resources for migratory wildlife. A six-lane highway constructed through this ecologically sensitive and valuable farming land would have irredeemable consequences.

4. Conclusion

Members of the NSW Farmers' Association agree that the Pacific Highway between Tintenbar and Ewingsdale does need upgrading to improve road safety. However, on behalf of its members and the farming community in the extended study area, the NSW Farmers Association strongly supports using the existing Pacific Highway corridor for the T2E upgrade. The T2E section of highway from Knockrow to the Bangalow overpass is already zoned 9A for highway upgrade and some land has been acquired in the southern corridor. There are also less economic and environmental constraints on the existing corridor compared to a new highway through the extended study area.

The extended study comprises State and Regionally Significant farm land, as identified in the Northern Rivers Farmland Protection project. A great proportion of this land would be destroyed or become unviable, and the Byron shire would lose important contributions to the economy, the community and the environment.

Prime agricultural land such as that in the expanded study area is a precious resource that is under increasing development pressure, particularly in the far north coast region. A great deal of good agricultural land in this area has already been lost to urban and rural residential development. This is having a significant impact on the economic and social value of agriculture in the region.

In the case of the T2E upgrade, there is a feasible alternative to destroying prime agricultural land and long term family farm enterprises, and that is to use the existing Pacific Highway corridor.

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