

## **INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES**

**Organisation:**

**Name:** Ms Gwenaelle Seznec

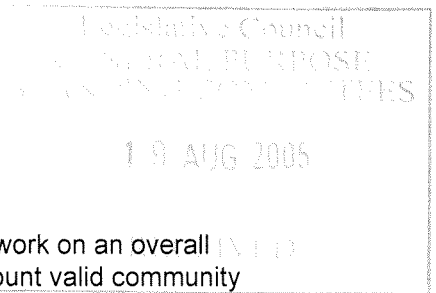
**Telephone:**

**Date Received:** 19/08/2005

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**Subject:**

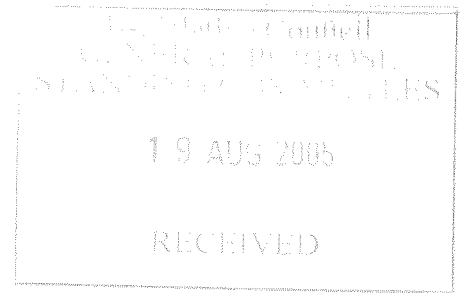
**Summary**



I urge this Inquiry recommend a review of the transport issues and network on an overall basis, appropriate and complete studies be performed, taking into account valid community concerns, and looking at the bigger picture rather than focusing on short-term cost-cutting exercises, a stronger focus on protecting sensitive ecological area, home to between 50 and 100 threatened species, and upgrading the Pacific Highway by following the current route, with diversions around towns, in order to minimise ecological and social impacts. Attached is my detailed submission.

I am currently overseas and will be back on the 9th of September.

Ms Gwenaelle Seznec



Thursday, 25 August 2005

Parliamentary Inquiry into Pacific Highway Upgrades  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4.

**SUBMISSION IN RELATION TO THE WOODBURN TO BALLINA PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADE**

To the Committee Members

Please find below some of my issues on the Woodburn to Ballina Pacific Highway upgrade.

I have major concerns over the way this project was conducted. I believe that the process was performed with **very minimal community consultation, and was rushed**, therefore resulting in **incomplete and inaccurate data**. Details of these concerns have been sent to the Chief Executive Officer of the RTA, Mr. Paul Forward, in early June, as well as to numerous members of parliament, including Mr. Bob Carr and Mr. Michael Costa. Although I have received an acknowledgement of my letter from Mr Forward's office, I have to this day not received an answer to my queries and concerns.

I also **have grave concerns about how a very sensitive area, with large stands of native bush, and numerous threatened species, can be destroyed in the name of development**, and in some cases to protect an unsustainable sugar cane industry.

Finally, you will find that in some instances I have gone into very detailed points; The purpose is to highlight inconsistencies, errors, or provide examples of inadequacies in the RTA process, studies and information.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I have detailed in my submission to the RTA the issues and reasoning supporting my preferred options. However, I believe that **the best option**, not presented by the RTA, would be to **use the current Pacific Highway corridor, i.e. widen the road** to allow for a divided carriageway (4-lane), **and bypass the towns** (Woodburn, Broadwater and Wardell). This would ensure the least amount of disruption, whether it is environmental, social or economic. **Despite repeatedly asking the RTA why this was not considered, we have not obtained an answer.**

As a result, I felt that I (and the community) was given no choice but to choose the best of the unacceptable route options.

Please note that, as I could not locate information on the size of the study area, I have estimated it at over 110 square kilometres, as it is roughly 30 km long and over 7 km wide at its widest point. This is a very rough and conservative estimate based on maps provided by the RTA.

## 2. PROCEDURAL CONCERNS

One of my main concerns is the speed with which the project has been conducted. Despite initial advice to the community that the process would take approximately two years, we are now told it will be completed in September, i.e. ten months from the start of the project. The RTA seems to have the misguided belief that they will be able to apprehend all the ins and outs of an area covering over 110 square kilometres in that space of time.

Other issues include:

- “Community Information Evenings” were apparently held around October/November 2004. No-one in the Bagotville / Meerscham Vale area where I live was informed of this, despite being one of the areas that is most affected by the proposed routes (3 to 4 routes, out of the 5 proposed routes in Section 2). Therefore we had no input at this stage of the process.
- Members of the Community Liaison Group (CLG) had to sign confidentiality agreements and were repeatedly reminded not to disseminate information to the community. As a result, the CLG members could not relay information back to the community.
- The two “Progress Updates” sent out were uninformative and inadequate.
- The RTA website rapidly proved to be useless, as it was outdated and had little information.

- A “Community Information Centre” was opened less than one month before the proposed routes were announced, and was initially open only 8 hours per week, over 2 days. The times and days were later changed, without any advice to the community.
- We have asked the RTA/contractors numerous questions and requested access to documents, and found that answers were either not forthcoming or excruciatingly slow. We were also met by lack of knowledge of the area and its issues, and a culture of “blame-shifting”, i.e. blaming other agencies, contractors, employees etc. for any problem. This is **most unprofessional**, and did not in any way make the process faster.
- The “mud maps” sent to the residents by the RTA are inappropriate: there are no roads, no topographic information and very few reference points. The maps are extremely imprecise and impossible to use if trying to recognise the area. There was only one very detailed aerial photo with route overlays, available in only one location (the Community Information Centre), with limited opening times.
- Long delays in contacting residents whose property is directly affected by the proposed routes options. This was done by mail only and none of the residents were contacted by other means (e.g. telephone).
- The information provided by the RTA in the proposed routes flyer was **selective and biased, leading the readers towards one option**. The brochure shows only some information and does not include all the issues. I understand that the brochure cannot list all issues, however I am doubtful about why some information was chosen to be included, whereas other information was left out, despite also being crucial in the selection process. I believe that the RTA should have produced unbiased brochures and made the detailed information available to the residents at the display centres. This was not the case.
- Finally, I was advised that the RTA has sent to a select few (i.e. cane farmers) another route option, on which they were asked to comment. This route, informally called the “Flood-free” option, cuts a large swathe through National Parks, and seems to have been designed to assuage the cane farmers’ concerns by reducing the impact on local cane farms. This option was issued after the community consultation period was closed, and the rest of the community was not advised of this, nor asked to comment.

### 3. ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS

We have been provided with Geolyse's "Flora and Fauna Assessment of Route Options" draft report dated June 2005. As this was received very late, we were not able to verify the data. Whilst I refer to some of the comments made in this report, I note that this assessment appears inadequate and incomplete. In particular, the methodology shows that surveys performed were very limited:

- The surveys were performed over a very short period of time (15 days). Variances due to seasonality are not taken into account (e.g. migratory species).
- Surveys and survey efforts were very limited: the use of 13 sites for an area over 110 square kilometres is inadequate. Other examples of inadequate survey/survey efforts include: bird surveys conducted over one hour for two consecutive days only, performing bat surveys at only eight sites, spotlighting performed on only one night at five of the sites, and two nights at eight sites (with limited time spent i.e. 90mn). These cannot possibly reflect the population of an area.
- As a result, the data collected is insufficient to draw statistical conclusions (which is why there are no such statistics available in the report).

It is therefore not possible for this survey to accurately reflect the biodiversity of this area. I am also disturbed by the fact that, in Section 2, **only three of the eight survey sites were not located near towns**, and these remain on the edges of native bush. **No survey sites were actually located within areas of native vegetation/bush such as the heathlands, wetlands etc.** This means that the consultant potentially missed significant fauna and flora by remaining on the edges. The edge effect is a well-known scientific fact, and fauna/flora found in such areas are not necessarily representative of the fauna/flora located inside the relevant area of bush.

I was advised that local scientists and government agencies have also raised concerns about the adequacy and accuracy of the assessment.

Finally, this report does not provide quantifiable objective criteria to support the weightings used, but uses such vague words subjective to interpretation, as "likely", "potentially", "high", "moderate" etc.

This shows that the assessment is incomplete and would potentially capture much more significant data, especially in relation to threatened flora and fauna, should it be performed in a more adequate, objective and accurate manner. It is a perturbing thought that the RTA would rely on an incomplete, inappropriate, and potentially inaccurate assessment, to choose proposed routes.

**Routes 2A to 2D, and 3A, are nothing short of an environmental disaster** for one of the best preserved area on the Lower Richmond floodplain. Routes 2A to 2D would affect between 50 and 100 threatened species by destroying their habitat and cutting off important wildlife corridors (regional and sub-regional) linking Uralba, Coolgardie, and Wardell, with the Blackwall Range, the Tuckean Nature Reserve, Victoria Park. Refer Appendix A for detailed map.

- Routes 2A to 2C would effectively isolate two significant areas of relatively intact native vegetation and create island habitats with little if any genetic influx. This would most likely result in local depletion and extinctions of numerous species as the habitats could not support minimum viable populations for these species. Mitigation measures have not been proven to be efficient, and it is unlikely that they will be useful. They are effective for only limited species and serve mostly as a Public Relations exercise. For example, a koala will never enter an underground tunnel, and it is most unlikely that they will try and cross a noisy 100m stretch on an unstable/moving rope above cars zooming at 110 km/h.
- Route 2A passes through or very near a flying fox roost. Flying foxes are listed as Vulnerable both by the Commonwealth and the NSW governments. One of the main reasons for the significant decline of flying fox numbers is loss of roosting habitat as well as foraging habitat. This route would compound the issue.
- Draining of lands surrounding the new highway would destroy the surrounding wetlands and therefore the remaining fauna and flora that survived the initial destruction caused by the construction of the highway. Furthermore, these are species that are adapted to certain conditions (e.g. wet / swampy), which will be drastically modified.
- Constructing a new highway through Acid Sulphate Soils in areas of mangroves, swamps and wetlands will result in major impacts on fish life and breeding, with the significant risk of increased acid leaching into surrounding waters and destroying fish and their habitat, including important breeding sites.
- Geolyse's report also indicates that the study area potentially contains 100 threatened species, and 6 Endangered Ecological Communities. Despite limited surveys performed, Geolyse was still able to detect 21 threatened species and 5 endangered ecological communities (this does not include hair trap analysis which has not yet been performed), as listed under the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.
- **Local extinctions are a real threat** due to fragmentation of populations and habitats, increased road strikes, and impact of pollution (including noise) on local fauna and flora. Routes 2A to 2C and 3A would be disastrous to the fragile biodiversity that has managed to survive in an area, which despite having been disturbed, still contains large areas of good quality habitats. In

particular, Koala, Ground Parrot, Common Blossom Bat, Squirrel Glider, Long-Nosed Potoroo and Flying Fox (Grey-Headed and Black) will be severely affected, and may face local extinctions.

#### 4. SOCIAL ASPECTS

- Residents in Section 2 who do not live directly in town all rely on rainwater for drinking, cooking, etc. Diesel particulates are known to be carcinogenic and will therefore create a major problem for routes west of the river in Section 2. This does not appear to have been considered in the RTA's "Route Options Development Report – Phase 1".
- Pollution is also a major concern in this area from road runoff, which will contain high levels of contaminants and pollutants. These will affect the rivers, springs, groundwater and dams in the area, which many people rely on in addition to the rainwater.
- New and/or larger access roads will be required, which will carry more traffic as a result of the limited access to the highway. This has not been communicated to the residents and will add further to the disruption caused by the new highway. These access roads will be the source of increased pollution, noise, and accidents, as a result of the increase in traffic.
- Overall, most of the proposed routes would significantly affect the quality of life of residents who have made a conscious decision (at a cost) to live away from the current highway and towns, so as to enjoy a more rural lifestyle, and would end up with a 4-lane highway next door. This also does not appear to hold much weight with the RTA.

#### 5. ECONOMIC ASPECTS

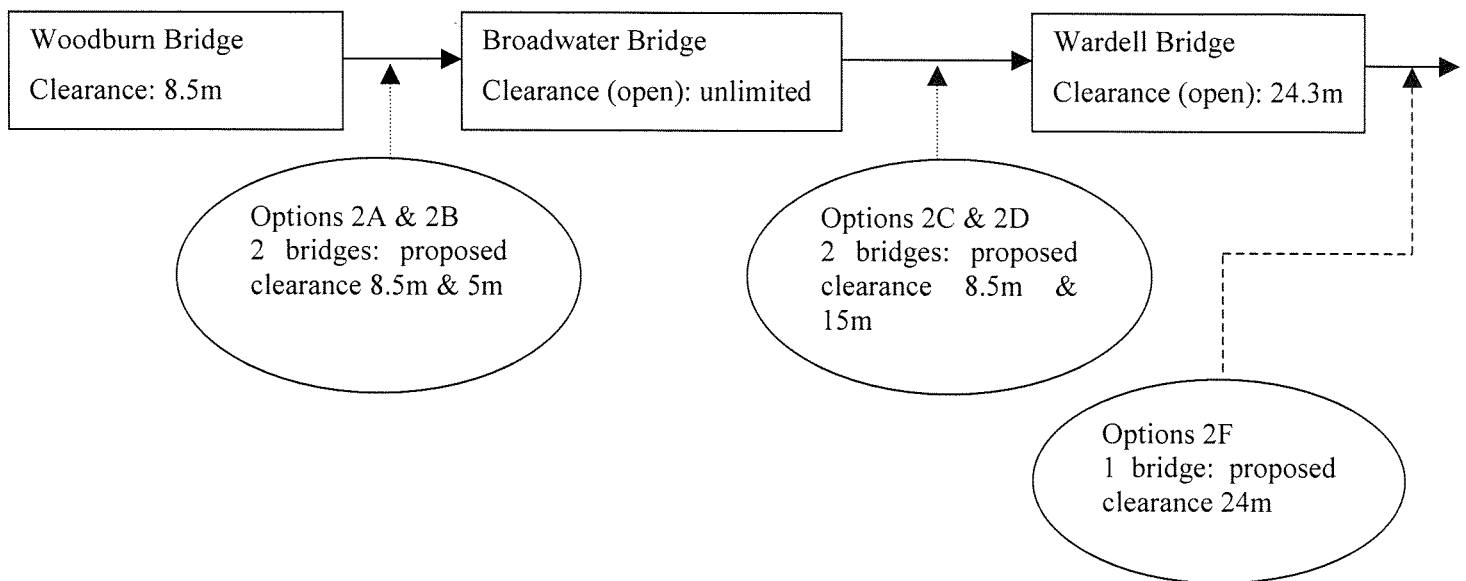
- The RTA has repeatedly said that certain routes were an issue for the cane farmers who would lose their livelihood. Whilst I agree that it is an issue for farmers, I would like to point out that the sugar cane industry has a limited future. It is very important to remember that:
  - The Federal Government has recognised that cane farming was in dire straits and often non-viable. 3.9 million dollars were given to cane farmers and mills on the NSW North Coast as a first instalment of the Sugar Sustainability Grant in June 2004. The Federal Government is also helping cane farmers leave the industry by providing grants of up to \$100,000. This is part of a \$444 million national rescue package for the sugar cane industry alone. **Without the State and Federal Governments' assistance, most cane farms would not be viable.**
  - Cane farmers are struggling to sell their farms in this area, which is a reflection of the limited future for this industry.



- Economic loss can be compensated, and selling cane land to the RTA may provide an opportunity for local farmers to leave the industry or change their strategy.
- The RTA's "Route Options Development Report – Phase 1" includes costings where houses are affected, using a standard cost of \$250,000 per house. This is extremely inadequate and under-priced, as most rural residential properties in Section 2 and 3, not located near the current Highway, but located near or on the proposed routes, fetch upwards of \$400,000 (conservative figure). The cost is not only that of rebuilding a house, it is that of the lifestyle.
- In relation to costs, the RTA only considers land directly affected by the routes but does not take into account the loss in value of the neighbouring properties. Whilst people on the current Pacific Highway have generally purchased at lower prices with the knowledge of the highway being nearby and due for an upgrade, people living further from the current Highway have purchased a lifestyle including rural or bush outlook, calm and privacy. The prices for such properties as indicated before are upwards of \$400,000 (to more than \$1 million) and reflect the desirability of the area. These residents did not buy land to have a 4-lane divided carriageway (with potential for 6 lanes) close to their property. Effectively, most of the routes proposed by the RTA would destroy this lifestyle and affect all residents through a decrease in property value and in quality of life.

## 6. INFRASTRUCTURE ASPECTS

- In its "Route Options Development Report – Phase 1" report, the RTA has used specific clearance heights for bridges on the proposed routes and costed them accordingly. However, I believe that these **costings are inaccurate and not comparable as based on inconsistent assumptions** (refer Figure A below). For example, the bridge on option 2C is 8.5m high, whilst the one on option 2D (partly superimposed on 2C) is 15m high. Also the bridge on Option 2F is shown as 24 m high, but bridges on 2C and 2D, only 6.7 km upstream of Wardell, are significantly lower. Bridges as shown on Options 2A to 2D would restrict current navigational access. **If we follow the RTA's argument that the navigational access should remain the same, then 2A to 2D bridges should have a clearance of 24m**, and options 2A and 2B would be the most expensive.



**Figure A: Summarised representation of the RTA's Bridge Clearance Requirements**

- The flood event for the period 29 June to 1 July 2005 also showed that significant parts of most of the proposed routes in Section 2 were under flowing water, or completely covered by deep water over very large areas. Pictures can be provided to support this. This contradicts the RTA, which reported this area as flood-free. I also note that this was a “minor” flood event, with the Wilsons River only reaching 10.2m at Lismore (which has happened 16 times in the last 80 years), and was reported in the media as a 1 in 10 year flood. This **clearly demonstrates the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the RTA studies**. As this area is not flood-free, the RTA should change their costings to include flood mitigation measures. By contrast the current Pacific Highway remained free of water as did options 2F.
- A highway on routes affected by flooding would create a significant obstacle to flood waters and would result in increased damage (to roads, crops, properties, etc.) to areas west of the highway. This does not appear to have been properly considered

## 7. PERSONAL COMMENTS

The short-sightedness of developing areas with only a thought to the immediate (geographic and time) consequences results in long-term catastrophes, e.g. whilst a population may survive 20 years, it may not be viable and may become extinct in less than 100 years. It is not cutting down one tree that destroys the environment, it is hundreds of thousands of people and developers that are destroying our (and their) environment when they think they are cutting down “only” one tree, through the compounding effect. Australia is lucky enough to still be able to save some of its unique fauna and flora, but the NSW Government is happy to sell its future for the sake of

unsustainable economic development (i.e. relying on the finite, and polluting, petroleum and coal resources).

Since the NSW and Federal Governments are ready to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into roads, they should seriously look and think beyond the next 5 to 10 years. By not investing, we are only postponing the problems.

- Road transport is not sustainable in the long-term due to the increasing prices of petrol / oil and reducing reserves of petroleum.
- Australia will never be able to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions if it continues to support polluting industries based on coal and petrol. This is despite the fact that Australia has been the country that is the most affected by the depletion of the ozone layer.
- Rail transport provides a more sustainable, less expensive and less polluting transport option. It also reduces loads on the roads and associated damage, thereby reducing costs of road maintenance. Finally, freight rail accidents are much less costly to the Australian community as they are generally rare in developed countries with adequate rail safety infrastructure, with fewer human casualties.

Whilst the RTA and the Governments can compensate for financial and economic losses, nothing can be done to compensate ecological and environmental losses. It takes hundreds of years for rainforests to form, and only two years to grow sugar cane. We cannot put a dollar value on our environment and it is all too often taken for granted and discounted.

What is destroyed will be gone forever and will not come back. Extinction is exactly that, and koalas will not appear out of thin air to repopulate Australia once they are extinct.

## 8. CONCLUSION

I urge this Inquiry recommend:

- a review of the transport issues and network on an overall basis, including:
  - developing the rail freight system and network; and
  - reducing the number of heavy vehicles (especially B-Doubles, C-Triples and road trains) on our roads, and in particular on the overloaded Pacific Highway.
- Appropriate and complete studies be performed, taking into account valid community concerns, and looking at the bigger picture rather than focusing on short-term cost-cutting exercises.
- A stronger focus on protecting sensitive ecological area, home to between 50 and 100 threatened species, with no equivalent in the State or in Australia.

- Upgrading the Pacific Highway by following the current route, with diversions around towns, in order to minimise ecological and social impacts.