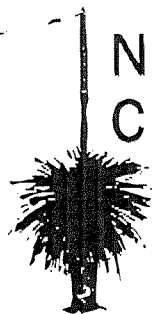


INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

Organisation: Nature Conservation Council of NSW
Name: Ms Cate Faehrmann
Position: Director
Telephone: 9279 2466
Date Received: 30/08/2005

Subject:

Summary



Nature Conservation Council of NSW

The voice for the environment since 1955

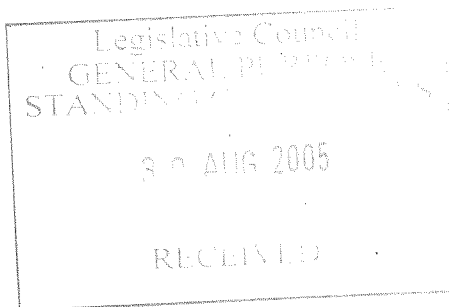
Level 5, 362 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000

Ph: 02 9279 2466 Fax: 02 9279 2499

Email: ncc@nccnsw.org.au

Web: www.nccnsw.org.au

ABN: 96 716 360 601



General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4
Parliament House
Macquarie Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

29 August 2005

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 Inquiry into Pacific Highway Upgrade

As the State's peak environmental organisation since 1955, the **Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC)** works closely with member groups, local communities, government and business to ensure a positive future for our environment. NCC serves as the umbrella organisation for more than 130 environmental member groups to coordinate and develop NSW-based community education projects, scientific research, conferences, publications and awareness campaigns. NCC is also influential in identifying key conservation decisions and reporting with those involved in management at a local, state and national level.

Firstly, I would like to express thanks to the Legislative Council and the standing members of the General Purpose Committee No. 4 for tackling this fundamentally important issue concerning the State. The upgrading of the Pacific Highway offers potential improvements on safety and reliability, however, there is a high risk for deleterious effects on the natural environment.

NCC has been monitoring the upgrade of the Pacific Highway and is liaising with individuals, community groups, consultants and RTA officers on this issue. From the past and present state of developments, NCC is particularly concerned with the potential impacts the upgrade may have on the natural environment. At present, it seems economic influences have dominated route options and study zones, rather than a sustainable approach having been taken that incorporates community needs and protection of the environment.

It is apparent from communication with stakeholders that the priority for the upgrade of the Pacific Highway has been to enhance freight transport routes above improving safety for tourists and local residents. Whilst adequate freight routes are critical to the states economy, alternative solutions such as rail have not been fully considered. Additionally, the increase of freight transport predicted on these roads will only increase the safety concerns that the RTA is aiming to alleviate. Unfortunately, the environmental impacts of such upgrades have been secondary to the economic driver of this program.

NCC has made submissions on many of the upgrades and below is a brief summary of our major concerns with regards to each upgrade. This highlights the overall poor performance of the RTA in relation to environmental issues in this process.

Tugun

The preferred route option that was passed for this area runs to the Western side of the current Pacific Highway and the Goldcoast - Coolangatta Airport and to the Eastern side of the environmentally significant area of the Cobaki Broadwater Wetland. At present this wetland is an important representative of its habitat within its bio-geographical region, containing at least fifteen migratory bird species, four fauna species and six flora species all listed as endangered or vulnerable under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act).

The western side of the Cobaki Broadwater has been designated as a compensatory habitat for the offset of threatened communities along the proposed bypass. This area is considered as degraded land and proposed as a site for recreation of the endangered habitat. It should be noted that habitat recreation especially of wetlands has a poor track record of success. Where route alternatives exist, the route that has the least environmental, social and economic impacts should be considered. In this case alternative routes exist that would minimise the local environmental impacts. However the RTA, in fast tracking this upgrade, has failed to survey the local area widely enough.

Wells Crossing to Iluka Rd

Grafton lies on the inland Western side of the proposed bypass study area. This area has been identified as a significant habitat for many wildlife species including an isolated population of the threatened coastal emu. Rerouting of the highway to that chosen would result in the isolation of a significant portion of emu habitat. Currently there are only 40-100 individuals left, and local bird experts believe that further reductions to this already highly reduced and fragmented habitat will have significant negative impacts on this population.

Residents are strongly opposed to any development that impacts on this area east of the Pacific Highway. Many are of the view that a need exists for conservation and preservation of the area, such that the coastal emu is allowed to migrate from the coast to the river in an east/west direction with access to all the different vegetation zones necessary for their nesting, breeding, drinking and foraging.

The emus have become funneled into this last corner as they are restricted by the river, the existing Pacific Highway and the coast. If this habitat is dissected it will fragment the population, leaving isolated breeding groups, limited or no access to resources, and is likely to have a deleterious impact on the emu to a level from which they will not be able to recover. This is the last known population of the eastern coastal emu, whose habitat has been reduced by 85 percent in the last twenty years, and the last stronghold of 15 percent will be lost if the RTA insist upon any route which dissects this last undisturbed coastal bushland of NSW.

The most positive outcome that the RTA could have in developing this area would be based around upgrading the existing road to its dual carriage-way, with well suited underpass and overpass links for flora and fauna. These would need to be monitored in order to assess their effectiveness and managed in order to eliminate the often occurrence of predation by feral cats.

Bonville

There was an alteration of the upgrade proposal due to the discovery of a large breeding population of female koalas in the vicinity of this site. The route alterations proposed by the RTA are not considered substantial enough to mitigate the likely impacts that the road upgrade would have on the koala population in this area. In light of the new information that has become available, it would be more appropriate for the RTA to reassess the entire situation.

Bulahdelah

The NCC is opposed to the preferred route option E for the Bulahdelah bypass due to its environmental impact, particularly on threatened flora and fauna. If this bypass is to proceed, the alternative route options, all of which have been identified as having lower environmental impacts, must be considered. Although this upgrade seems inevitable, it is not acceptable that it should proceed to cut directly through a diverse vegetation community of national environmental significance, especially one that contains an endangered species, namely the eastern underground orchid listed as vulnerable under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSC Act).

Summary

The severity of these upgrades on the environment should not be taken lightly. Many of these developments pose negative impact on remnant vegetation and ecological communities. The strategic planning for the current use of the Pacific Highway does not seem to be designed with a focus on tourism and supporting coastal transport frameworks. This is evidenced by the large amount of opposition that stakeholders have expressed in this process.

The NSW Ministry of Transport together with the RTA should pursue a strategic planning program which consults relevant stakeholders along the Pacific Highway route from Hunter River to Queensland border before major developments are given approval.

In the assessment and planning process, the conservation and preservation of the social and environmental values of the locations involved, should be the driving objective of the upgrade of the Pacific Highway transport corridor. Where opportunities to widen existing routes are available these should be explored, as opposed to seeking alternative routes which are often through the types of habitats that have been mentioned in this submission. Alternative transport options, such as existing rail corridors, should also be further explored as a part of this program.

A proper review of all the matters addressed here is required and I trust that this Parliamentary Inquiry is a major step in this direction.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact NCC's Native Vegetation Campaigner, Madeline Hourihan on 9279 2466 or mhourihan@nccnsw.org.au

Regards



Cate Faehrmann
Director