

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

Organisation:

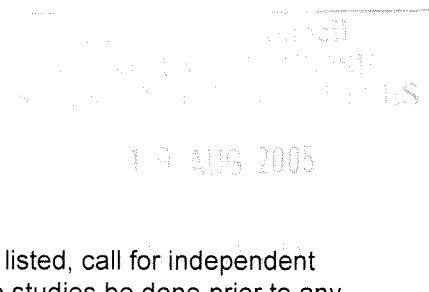
Name: Dr Milton Easton

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Date Received: 19/08/2005

Subject:

Summary



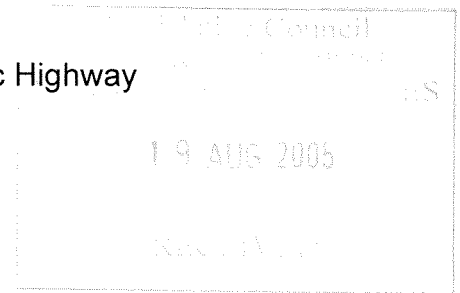
I request the parliamentary inquiry to closely examine the issues listed, call for independent verification of the RTA studies, recommend that further adequate studies be done prior to any final decision being permitted the RTA, strongly urge the government to develop a long term transport plan not reliant upon non-sustainable road freight, and protect the critically important environmental heritage threatened by these routes.

The attached document covers the following areas:

- 1/ Lack of Community Consultation.
- 2/ Concept Flaw
- 3/ Hasty Decisions and flawed studies
- 4/ Need to Reassess Transport, both State and National
- 5/ Ecological Concerns
- 6/ Pollution
- 7/ Flooding
- 8/ Amenity
- 9/ Economic

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry re the Proposed Pacific Highway Upgrade.

Dr. M. R. Easton,



18/08/05

To the Parliamentary Members of the Inquiry,

I write to you regarding the processes by which the RTA is apparently mismanaging this vital project.

Please note that I am one of the joint authors of a separate more technical submission but that the document here-in contains concerns separate from those in the joint submission.

My concerns fall into discrete areas as itemised below.

1/ Lack of Community Consultation.

- **Failure to notify potentially affected landowners that the process was occurring.** My property lies on the western boundary of the study area (Woodburn to Ballina section). I received no notification of the initial RTA information nights (September 2004 ?). It is my understanding that the entire Bagotville and Meerschaum Vale area was omitted from the RTA mail out. These areas cover approximately 50 % of the central section of the study area.

The initial information sessions run by the RTA served to inform the public of the proposed upgrade, advise them of the RTA processes and timing, and invite the public to nominate as community representatives for the purposes of forming the Community Liaison Groups (CLGs).

This may well have resulted in the apparently biased representation seen in the CLG membership, where the overwhelming majority were chosen from residents living adjacent to the existing highway or from groups with other vested interests.

This is clearly a denial of genuine community representation.

- The CLG members were compelled, as a condition of membership, to sign confidentiality agreements which precluded their discussion of RTA plans/ideas etc with the community that they supposedly represented. To

simplify, the liaison groups were forbidden to liaise, thus effectively precluding any meaningful public input.

- **Failure to respond to legitimate concerns regarding environmental assessments made by agents of the RTA**, and raised not only by CLG members (Mark Graham, ecologist) but also by other government agencies (Ballina Shire and National Parks). I personally asked Shane Higgins (RTA project manager) what exactly were the concerns expressed. He could not or would not detail these issues, but did reply that he believed that the RTA had fulfilled their legal obligations for that stage of the process. I subsequently contacted, in June this year, Mr. Forward, RTA chief, stating my dissatisfaction and requesting clarification, but have not yet received any details, although receipt of letter was acknowledged.
- **Completely inadequate information upon which to formulate a submission.** The RTA preferred options were released on the 23rd of June. The submissions were due the 20th July. It must be noted that those two reports (ecological and general) together constituted over 200 pages, but at that time, the RTA *had still not released those reports for public viewing*. The public therefore had less than one month to reply, but they did not have access to the information upon which the RTA had apparently based their route options. Nor did they have the time to read, analyse and comment upon such complex issues.

I had requested that information as soon as the closing date for the submissions was announced, but I did not receive this until **after** the initial closing date had passed!

To summarise, public consultation has not existed.

- Large groups of affected people were effectively excluded initially.
- CLG members were gagged by confidentiality and could not inform the public.
- The public were not allowed access to the process prior to the selection of the preferred options and have thus been excluded from any influence in the selection of those options.
- Information upon which route options were based was excluded from the public domain until after preferred route options were announced.
- The RTA have been unable and/or unwilling to respond to public concerns regarding apparently significant flaws in the assessments upon which route options were decided.
- The RTA representatives have consistently been unable or unwilling to answer specific questions.

2/ Concept Flaw

RTA representatives have at times stated that any flaws in their initial studies will not matter in the long run as they have the ability to design around minor problems once the more detailed and rigorous studies are done **after** the selection of the final route. The logic of this escapes me.

Given the apparent major flaws in the studies, the lack of response from the RTA when questioned regarding those flaws and the difficulties one has in obtaining information from the RTA, I believe the inquiry must examine this very carefully. The potential waste of public money and environmental damage resulting from this approach are enormous.

3/ Decide in Haste, Repent at Leisure

This study area is ecologically diverse, geophysically complex (acid sulphate, alluvial soils prone to flooding) and economically varied. Yet, in just 6 months the RTA has apparently done initial studies adequate to permit selection of route options. In contrast, the Yelgun to Chinderah section of the highway was studied for several years prior to construction. That section had enormous cost blow-outs and may still be leaching acid sulphates into the surrounding environment.

The RTA initial timeline had route options for public discussion occurring September 2005 at the earliest, and final selection occurring in 2006. The whole process has been rushed through, 12 months ahead of schedule, despite concerns over RTA study flaws, the potential for major problems and the absence of public consultation.

The RTA can decide in haste, but it will be the people of NSW and our heritage who will repent at leisure.

4/ Need to Reassess Transport, both State and National.

This is covered in more detail in the joint submission of which I am only one author. I summarise briefly here;

Road safety and transport needs are the rationale for the upgrade. The concept of peak oil tells us that the use of freight trucks is not economically viable in the long term. The same reasoning indicates a likely long-term reduction in private vehicular traffic.

A significant cost saving, as well as reduced environmental impact would be achieved by reducing the highway design from the current 100 metre wide route, designed for B-double trucks at 110kph, to a dual carriageway designed for 90kph maximum speeds; This would also satisfy the safety issues and allow a duplicate (the existing highway) and divert (around existing towns) approach.

Economic, environmental and social factors mandate improved rail (freight and passenger) services. We cannot afford to spend billions of dollars on roads which will not be economically viable. This money must be spent on more efficient infrastructure.

5/ Ecology

- Although the flora and fauna assessment (from Hyder) is inadequate (too short, errors in mapping, drought etc), it is clearly stated in their document that the potential environmental impacts are minimised by keeping the highway as close as possible to the existing route.
- Routes 2A to 2D will have major impact on **at least 50** threatened animal species and also on **endangered ecological communities** (as defined by both the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995), including various subgroups of wetlands, closed forests, open forests and heath-lands.
- These routes put **at least 6 fauna species**, including potoroos, ground parrots and blossom bats **at risk of local extinction**. Note that the colonies of these species in this area represent some of the few remaining viable ones. Local extinction here could threaten those species existence. There may well be others, as subsequent definitive Environmental Impact Assessment will show.
- Hyder's own report states that the "potential hydrological alteration" has not been studied and has "associated impacts on amphibians, EECs, and Fish", (p82). Wick drains may alter the watertable and thus **destroy the wetlands and the heath-land** around Wardell.
- These routes cut across **fauna corridors** of major importance (NPWS), including almost continuous Koala habitat at Rileys Hill, Bagotville, Wardell Mountain, Wardell Heath and the Blackwall Range. As such, any road through here represents a significant **threat to a large, healthy koala population as well as numerous other local species, including swamp and red-necked wallabies**.
- Routes 2A & 2B cross the Richmond River then the Tuckean Broadwater, both with potential damage to wetlands and/or mangroves. This has potential impact **on fish breeding** as well as potential *ongoing* Acid sulphate release into the river. The Tuckean is the biggest **acid sulphate** hotspot on the coast (Garry Owers).

6/ Pollution

- The projected increase in heavy traffic on the highway will inevitably result in increased diesel emissions. This is true wherever the road goes. However, the production of mutagenic and carcinogenic dioxins and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons will **pollute the drinking water of people reliant on tank water**. This does not apply to those using town water. Therefore, the route should be kept where it will affect the least people. **2F affects the least** in terms of drinking water.
- Neither should we have fish breeding areas or wetlands exposed to dioxin run-off (2A, 2B, 2C and 2D), Dioxins are lipophilic substances that

accumulate in the food-chain. There is no safe level. **These routes could poison our food with dioxins as well as threaten the fish/prawn stocks through dioxin effects on fertility. 2F is away from major wetlands or fish breeding areas.** My section of our joint technical submission details this information.

7/ Flooding

- Routes 2A and 2B each require two bridges across the area between Rileys Hill and Wardell Mountain, as well as a raised road across the associated wetlands. This bottleneck drains the water from the whole Richmond Valley and any obstruction to flow here **will prolong the inundation** suffered upstream during floods (Mr. Bert Plenkovich, SES Flood coordinator).
- Routes 2A and 2B, each require bridges of at least 800 metres, plus associated raised roads across the flood plain wetlands. During recent flooding, 29/06 to 01/07, the **Tuckean Broadwater was more than twice its usual width**. The weather bureau says that a flood event like this last one occurs every 5 years.
- During the same flood, **proposed routes 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D were all under deepwater** in at least one point between the Richmond River crossing and Wardell **but the existing highway was intact from Woodburn to Ballina**.

8/ Amenity

- Construction of a 100 metre wide freeway across this area will restrict access for many local residents; An upgraded existing highway will not.

9/ Economic

- Personal communications from owner/operators of garages and pubs in Woodburn, Broadwater and Wardell have raised fears of business loss if the minimal divert and duplicate option is not taken.
- The property of people previously well away from the highway will be devalued as result of decisions over which they have no control. They have no legal recourse. People who bought property close to the highway did so accepting its proximity and the resultant lower prices.
- Recent federal government statements concerning the sugar industry suggest that its long-term viability is doubtful. The economic losses suffered by the cane industry if route 2F were selected (of note, the other proposed routes will also destroy significant cane lands), could be compensated for by the existing Federal government industry package, or by the RTA for existing value. The same is not true for those whose home equity, amenity and environment will be lost with the selection of routes other than 1A, 2F, 3B.

Conclusion

I beg the parliamentary inquiry to:

- closely examine the above issues,
- call for independent verification of the RTA studies,
- recommend that further adequate studies be done prior to any final decision being permitted the RTA,
- strongly urge the government to develop a long term transport plan not reliant upon non-sustainable road freight,
- protect the critically important environmental heritage threatened by these routes.

Finally, I advise that I am away currently but can be contacted via e-mail. I will be back in the Northern Rivers on the 9th September.

Yours,
Dr. M. R. Easton