

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

Organisation:

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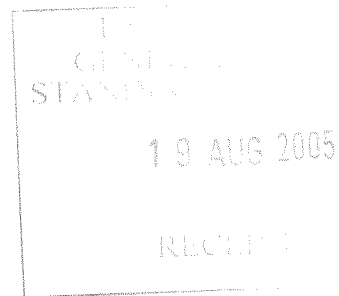
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Subject:

Summary

KG & EM LAW



GA & KG LAW

15th August 2005.

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

Response to the proposed upgrade of the Pacific Highway between Ballina & Woodburn.

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns and opinions on the route selection process currently underway. As affected farmers within the study area, the whole highway upgrade has the potential to destroy our current environment and livelihood. See following attached submission to GEOLink in June 2005.

Proposed routes have serious effects on current and future income derived from agricultural activities and future diversification, affecting not only the farmers but also local industries and communities. The whole coastal stripe from the border to Grafton is farmed intensively by small land owners, providing income for local communities and contributing to the economic stability of the state as a whole. To run a four lane highway through this productive region of the state, with its high rainfall and unstable and unsuitable geological formation, is just ridiculous and effectively forces a large number of primary producers to make substantial changes to their income-producing activities. In fact, quite a number of farmers will be unable to continue farming as what's left of their holdings will not provide a sustainable income for their families.

Community Liaison Group:

We are not aware of any obvious selection process that was undertaken to choose the members of the community liaison group and consider that some

appointed members have a vested interest in the final placement of the route. The influential members of the community liaison group have been able to steer the investigation of the various routes away from their own properties.

From the Minutes available, it appears that there has been conflict amongst the members of the liaison group.

A letter dated 20th December 2004 indicated “community liaison groups had recently been formed”. This letter was not received until some weeks later and in fact community meetings were first held in February 05. As a land holder adversely affected by two of the proposed options, one would have expected a more timely involvement in the study area. It appears that the proposed routes were already predetermined and that the community liaison groups were merely window dressing.

Study Area:

The study area selected passes through unique environment areas including low-lying riverland, national and state parks, and aboriginal heritage sites. There are specific ecological features and landscape within and around the proposed routes and the whole area is flood prone. Given climate change, rising sea levels could impact adversely on the current proposed options.

This area is similar to the highway from Grafton to Maclean which in future will need upgrading and a route selection process undertaken. The current and future study areas pass through intensive prime agricultural areas and affect a large number of small land holdings. Loss of prime agricultural land for small land holders will render farms unviable and effect future earnings of current and future farmers.

A flood-free alternative could be through a western route where intensive agriculture is less prevalent eg Grafton, Casino, Kyogle, Murrwillumbah route. This would be in line with the regional road concept of the Pacific Highway and remove traffic pressure away from the coast.

What's happening:

Is there collusion or a hidden agenda between the government (RTA) and the transport companies who seem intent on pushing through the upgrades? The obvious benefits from this upgrade favour the big trucks who don't want to go through towns, traffic lights or hills. These trucks favour a consistent speed and trucking companies have a close interest in having this particular section upgraded to ensure travelling times between Sydney and Brisbane are reduced, with no real benefit to local communities – in fact a detrimental effect on local surroundings.

Is the RTA a bureaucracy out-of-control? The reliability of the statistics gathered by the RTA is questionable: anecdotal evidence indicates that figures and statistics supplied by Hyder/RTA cannot be substantiated or replicated by independent studies, in particular the results of studies on the environmental flora, fauna and geological formations upon which the routes are constructed.

Community newspaper reports constantly refer to the RTA as failing to listen to the community (see Border Mail paper reports by Nadine Fisher reporting the Banora Point upgrade as an example) and the route selection process for the Ballina-Woodburn upgrade is just another example of poor community involvement. Media

reports on the RTA indicate that there is something wrong in their system ie speed cameras.

Are the RTA highway designers more interested in the style and good looks of their new highway and the awards they may obtain from their peers, rather than in the detrimental effect their new highway design will have on community, the environment and the livelihood of the land holders affected.

RTA designers seem quite interested in having “visual connection opportunities” between the highway and the town (P155 Woodburn to Ballina route selection report) . Designers of the bridge over the Richmond River at Broadwater point out the opportunities for “potential views north and south over Broadwater to Cooks Hill and the Richmond River and the flood plains beyond may be possible from the high point of the bridge.” There are other such statements regarding views or ‘visual impacts’ – their terminology, in this document. Given the speeds expected along this section of the road and the way RTA construct their bridges so that you can’t see out through the side walls, this excitement about the views is odd. Drivers travelling at 110kms per hour have to maintain concentration and really don’t have the time to take in the supposed ‘views’. The regional highway currently in use is far more picturesque than any four laned highway could be.

Given that a main object of the new highway is to reduce noise in townships, why are three of the route options so close to the township of Broadwater?

Time frame:

Why the necessity to have a quick decision for this particular section when there are other sections in the State in more urgent need of upgrading? The undue haste indicates another agenda in operation within the RTA.

Has there been sufficient thought given to alternative transport infrastructure apart from upgrading roads that just allow trucks to go faster? Train systems should be made more viable, given the increasing fuel costs and damage to the environment caused by expanding road routes to accommodate transports.

It would also be interesting to see what percentage of heavy transport currently using the Pacific Highway, is through traffic ie travelling through from Brisbane to Sydney without any loads for clients inbetween. It is quite conceivable that a very high proportion of heavy transport could be using the inland route between Sydney and Brisbane which lessens the impact on fragile coastal routes and vacation areas. Turning the coastal route into four lanes is detrimental to the environment, the townships along the coast and leaves a lot of small farmers without a job or future.

Community:

The concept of upgrading the Pacific Highway to a four lane highway between Sydney and Brisbane is flawed and the cost of construction and maintenance is exorbitant. It is not justifiable and does not automatically translate into a decrease in traffic accidents. Roads do not kill people or cause accidents: people’s driving habits cause accidents – a more proactive driver education and testing program should be developed and employed. Admittedly there are sections which need improving but a more realistic solution could be a two lane highway with regular overtaking sections and a regular maintenance schedule.

With the increase in the ageing population moving to the coastal regions, and tourists using the current Pacific Highway route, a four lane highway isn't going to provide a faster travelling time for long distance transport. The older driver, tourists and local drivers, drive more slowly and will use the upgraded highway for their own convenience. A more realistic and workable option is to separate coastal and local traffic from the national transport route and retain the Pacific Highway for slower moving regional traffic as stated by the Minister for Infrastructure Planning and Natural Resources.

How does the compensation for the loss of agricultural land, which might be offered, replace the contribution that primary production makes to the national economy? Any compensation package cannot cover the future incomes which could be derived from primary production by current or future farmers working on the land. Current proposals have a stifling effect on ongoing farming practices and communities which rely on passing highway traffic for their livelihood.

We have been driving the highway between Ballina and Wagga Wagga for 30 years and are well qualified to comment on the changes to highways that have occurred in that time. We know that we don't go into those towns that are now bypassed such as Yass, Goulburn, and Taree and will only stop at those places which are easily accessed for fuel and food such as Marulan, Kempsey and Coffs Harbour. Express way travelling has the effect of keeping you on the road until you need fuel and inexperienced drivers become tired and lose concentration long before they decide to take an 'off' ramp to a service centre. There is nothing to entice a driver to stop at regular intervals, as promoted, on the type of highways being developed now. Motorways are boringly easy to drive and need mental and physical variations such as varying speeds, or the need for concentration when going through towns or local traffic.

To conclude, we consider the redevelopment of this section of the Pacific Highway to be such a bad decision, in all ways including the irreversible damage to fragile, diverse environments, the destruction of varied flora and fauna, the flow-on effects in local communities to the loss of productive land and community members, the high cost of ongoing maintenance if the road is built along proposed routes when the track record for the RTA is known to be less than satisfactory.

George Law
Beryl Law
Ken Law
Elizabeth Law
And families.

Attached following: submission to Hyder