

INQUIRY INTO PERFORMANCE OF THE NSW ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AUTHORITY

Organisation: Koolewong Point Clare and Tascott Progress Association
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Partially Confidential



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The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

RE: Performance of the NSW Environment Protection Authority (Inquiry)

I write to you on behalf of the residents along the Newcastle rail corridor between Point Clare and Koolewong. This relatively short distance encompasses approximately 3000 residential properties. Rail noise and specifically, freight train noise affects many residents in this area, whom have been making complaints to statutory bodies for many years. Noise level measurements by Railcorp and others have been carried out in the area with readings over 90dBA taken around the Koolewong area from freight trains. Furthermore, there is a growing concern on the amount of coal dust being generated by laden and unladen coal trains coming through the rail corridor, sometimes several times a day.

We believe this Parliamentary Inquiry should examine the Environment Protection Authority's lack of effective action on freight train noise and pollution issues on the Northern Line freight route. Current practice by the EPA appears to protect the interests of large corporations, including multinational freight operators and coal companies, failing to address the impacts of health and safety on residents along the freight line.

While RailCorp has an Environment Protection Licence, the private operators of freight trains are not licensed in this way, nor are they regulated in any way to minimise noise pollution. The operators are not prosecuted and fined. Residents are questioning why has this been allowed to happen.

Residents of Koolewong, Point Clare and Tascott are often woken between 2am-3.30am by a succession of extremely noisy, old freight trains. Harsh, high pitched wheel squeal, clattering wagons and even humming vibration at times can ruin sleep. Noisy trains also disturb the peace during the day with various trains regularly travelling between 10.30am and around 12pm. This means that all manner of families and workers are affected by these disturbances.

The EPA acknowledges on its website:

Noise can be annoying, interfere with speech, disturb sleep or interfere with work. Prolonged exposure to loud noise can also result in increased heart rate, anxiety, hearing loss and other health effects.¹

Since 2000 the KPCTPA has sent complaints to the EPA, RailCorp and Transport for NSW, however in 14 years, noise from freight trains has not improved, but worsened. The number of freight trains has increased, and according to published figures, the number of freight trains will increase again from 29 to 44 in 2016, once the Epping to Thornleigh Third Track is finished². This is a great worry for

¹ <http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/noise/index.htm>

² http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/b2b/projects/ETTT_signed_DG_Report_July_13.pdf

those living nearby. This increase of 15 freight trains per day is a 50% increase in very long and very loud, screeching freight trains.

Probably more residents would complain individually, except for the NSW Government complaint line and email address for noise complaints are not well-publicised. It would make sense for noise complaint details to be publicised via notices at railway stations and an awareness campaign, however this has not been done. A cynic might think it has not been done because it's not in the interests of government and big business. It's also difficult to find any information on the number of freight train noise complaints. Concerned residents along the Northern Line feel this information is difficult to obtain, however should be freely available.

Several noise monitoring studies have been conducted in the areas concerned with disturbingly high readings. Noise readings of nearly 100 dB have been recorded on a balcony 50 metres from the track at Koolewong. Our association has also conducted our own independent noise monitoring at Koolewong Foreshore, which confirmed these levels. Nothing has been done to actually solve this health problem.

Track lubrication as a problem solver has been the mantra of authorities confronted with the wheel squeal issue, but it has NOT solved the problem of old freight rolling stock that is exempt from regulations that cover new rolling stock and passenger trains.

Koolewong resident detailed the problem on the ABC 7.30 report on

When [redacted] and his wife [redacted] moved to Koolewong over 30 years ago, freight train noise wasn't an issue. It became one with the privatisation of freight and was already bad enough in 2000 for Greenline to conduct unattended noise monitoring – see attached correspondence from Rail Services Australia. (Other residents have complained, particularly those living in Glenrock Parade). With wheel squeal exceeding 106dB from a 57 carriage freight train and many other instances of extremely loud noise, Greenline recommended that funding be sought for the installation of wheel squeal applicators between and including Tascott, Koolewong and Woy Woy. Unfortunately, residents were not automatically given the results of monitoring and had to utilise Freedom of Information processes to be given access to this important information.

In 2006 [redacted] had contacted the Ombudsman about the issue. The Ombudsman's office believed RailCorp was taking action to address the problem. The letter states:

As you know, I have spoken with several representatives of the authority, and have been advised that within the last fortnight two “lubricators” have been placed on the track. The authority is hopeful that the addition of these devices to the existing “lubricators” should make a noticeable and worthwhile difference to the situation. I am also advised RailCorp is considering alternate action if this proves not to be the case.

In June 2010, noise monitoring equipment was set up on the balcony. On Wednesday June 23 the decibel level peaked at nearly 100dB. RailCorp stated that an audible review of the unattended recordings 'concluded that the night time noise levels are likely to be dominated by moderate to high levels of wheel squeal and some flanging from freight movements.'

RailCorp noted:

...the Angle of Attack (AoA) monitoring system at Beecroft to identify train axle misalignments and provide feedback to freight operators so they can better maintain their rolling stock; hence, reducing the impacts of wheel squeal.

Top of Rail Friction Modifier Applications (TORFMA's) have also been employed at Koolewong in an effort to eliminate wheel squeal... Automated grease applicators have also been installed on the Koolewong track curve transitions in order to reduce the incidence of flanging noise.

Of course the Koolewong area is not alone in dealing with the Northern Line freight train noise problem. There is a Northern Rail Noise Committee incorporating, as well as Koolewong-Tascott-Point Clare Progress Association, the Beecroft and Cheltenham Civic Trust, the Pennant Hills District Civic Trust, the Cowan Rail Noise Steering Committee and the Brooklyn Community Association.

On October 7 2012 the committee wrote to Transport for NSW – noting that the application of lubricant to rails seemed to promise some relief for some members of the public in some locations.

However, most members of our committee have been trying without success for years to get some responsible action from the private operators to remediate excruciating levels of wheel squeal. Hence we are quite pessimistic about the likelihood of same without legal prescription. For this reason, our focus remains on Environment Protection Licenses as being the sine qua non for the public's achieving enduring relief from this serious problem.

The Northern Rail Noise Committee noted that, regrettably, EPL reform was not on the agenda.

The Committee is concerned that if the introduction of EPLs – or an appropriate substitute - is delayed then special dispensation being given to the rail freight industry is being countenanced by this Government. No other sector of the transport industry is known to receive such favourable treatment.

There are other comments that sadly remain pertinent in August 2014.

In the absence of an EPL that contains trigger levels that have regard to public health considerations and which are capable of being meaningfully enforced, we fail to see how the Government is sticking to its commitment to introduce "sensible solutions." It is not sensible for residents throughout Sydney to be exposed to noise in excess of 100dB, not to mention the other pollutants (air and vibration)... During the past 3 years particularly, the increase in wheel squeal has impacted severely on the quality of life of residents in areas proximate to rail corridors and on the other amenities of suburban and regional neighbourhoods. In some locations residents have contended with loss of sleep and some have found it necessary to move house.

At this point is worth noting that the NSW authorities' attitude to other fixes for freight train noise depends on whether noise is pre-existing or going to get worse during a construction phase or because of new work. This seems evident by the move to install noise barriers at Beecroft and give some property owners insulation. Noise barriers will also accompany part of the new Gosford Passing Loops, but there is no plan for areas already adversely affected where there is no new construction happening – even though the problem will worsen with a 50% rise in freight trains in 2016. Those freight trains are not just going through Beecroft and Gosford. It's hard to see how the EPA and successive NSW governments and departments could overlook this.

If the status quo is maintained then the health and amenity of residents near the northern freight route will surely worsen.

Freight companies using old wagons do not have to comply with regulations covering passenger trains and modern freight trains. This seems bizarre because it's the old rolling stock that causes the problem. The EPA appears to have done nothing to address this situation. Reports based on the Beecroft AoA noise results show that Pacific National/Asciano is by far the worst offender with Aurizon coming second.

has suggested previously that:

Old wagons should be mouth balled with sturdy bogies as is done in Europe.

A cushion should be placed between the track and concrete sleepers.

Wheels of freight wagons and locomotives should be coated.

Speed limits should be on curves in residential areas.

Noise monitors/cameras should be installed.

Noisy freight operators should be fined.

Noisy and polluting coal trains are part of the problem for residents of this area and create another health issue. A recent study in Newcastle shows the extent to which fine coal dust travels along the rail corridor and these trains also travel through the Central Coast several times per day³. Uncovered coal wagons – laden or unladen – produce fine particle emissions that pollute air near the tracks linked to asthma. Children at Point Clare Public School are exposed to coal dust drifting from the railway line opposite the school. Residents close to the railway line are exposed as well, so are cyclists and walkers on the Gosford to Woy Woy bike path.

Diesel pollution is another issue for residents that the EPA should have looked at. Anyone walking near the station and on the path up to Marine Rescue – a popular exercise and cycle route – will at times experience the stench of carcinogenic diesel fumes.

The most important issues for this association would be:

1. The introduction of Environment Protection Licenses so freight train operators no longer have special dispensation.
2. That the public are made more aware of avenues by which they can complain.
3. Insulation and noise barriers be installed where noise has been an issue for years, rather than only in areas where new work is carried out.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to this parliamentary inquiry.

Rendall Wagner

President

Koolewong and Point Clare - Tascott Progress Association Inc.

3 http://www.hcec.org.au/sites/default/files/CoalDustMonitoringStudyCTAG2013_web.pdf#overlay-context=20130308/testing-finds-coal-dust-levels-top-national-standards-5-days-7