

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

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Date Received: 22/09/2005

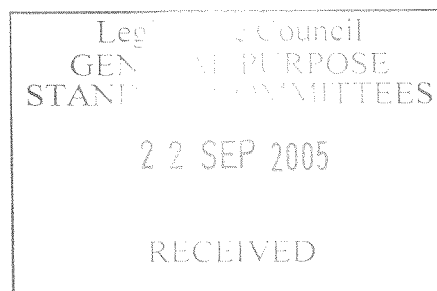
Subject:

Summary



21 SEP 2005

CE05/1637



Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No 4
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

To the Director

I refer to the Committee Chair's letter of 8 July 2005 regarding the current inquiry into Pacific Highway upgrades, including an offer for the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) to make a submission in this regard.

It was suggested that the RTA bring its submission to the hearing. However, it may be desirable to enable the Committee to review the RTA's submission in advance of the hearing.

The RTA's submission is enclosed. The RTA does not claim confidentiality in relation to any part of the submission.

Yours faithfully

Paul Forward
Chief Executive

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL – GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE
NO 4
INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES**

ROADS AND TRAFFIC AUTHORITY SUBMISSION

1) The impact of the proposed upgrade of the Pacific Highway between Ewingsdale and Tintenbar, with particular regard to the following issues:

- a) Reasons for expanding the highway upgrade study area on the St Helena to Tintenbar section*

RTA response:

The development of any major infrastructure project is a highly detailed and complex process, which includes the consideration of comprehensive information gathered on the physical, economic, engineering and social impacts. This information is obtained through the outcomes of extensive field investigations and consultation with the community, key stakeholders and government agencies. As part of this development process, it is sometimes necessary to adjust study areas for individual projects as new information becomes available.

For the Tintenbar to Ewingsdale project, one of the key issues raised at the community information sessions, community meetings and by the community liaison group, was that the original study area was too narrow and may have unacceptable impacts on the regionally and state significant agricultural lands in the area. *(Please refer to Attachment A for details of the study area)*

On 14 April 2005, as a result of these community representations and various other investigations undertaken by the project team, the study area for the project was extended to the east. Following this decision, additional community information sessions were advertised and held in late April 2005 and the community liaison group has been reformed to represent the larger study area.

Investigations have indicated that options to the east of the original study area could provide the potential for lesser social impacts due to the lower population density compared to the original study area, especially with regard to noise and property impacts.

It is important to note that there are viable options within both the original and the extended study area and that no decision has been made on a preferred route at this stage.

Investigation of feasible route options within the expanded study area is now proceeding and details of route options will be placed on display for community comment.

b) The level of upgrade proposed for this section and the remainder of the Pacific Highway

RTA response:

The Far North Coast is one of the fastest growing areas in NSW. In acknowledgement of this, the Pacific Highway is being developed to a 4-lane dual carriageway status highway with the provision for future upgrading to a total of 6 lanes where justified. The alignment is designed to suit 110 km/h driving conditions with a standard of access that takes into account growing community desires for the separation of local and through traffic. Dual carriageway roads with appropriately spaced high standard highway connections will result in safer driving conditions. In catering for the future transport needs of an increasingly populated region, the need for mitigation measures to address noise and visual amenity are also a key consideration for developing the route for the highway.

With completion of the current construction of the Brunswick Heads to Yelgun project, 62km of the 91km of Pacific Highway between Ballina and the State Border will have been upgraded to dual carriageways standard. The approved Ballina Bypass project and the Tintenbar and Ewingsdale project now in planning will complete this length.

c) The impact of the highway upgrade on prime agricultural land

RTA response:

Please note: It appears unclear whether this item refers specifically to the original or to the extended study area. As such, the RTA has endeavoured to address this issue in general terms.

No decision has been made on the preferred route for the highway between Tintenbar and Ewingsdale. Having said that, it can be noted that the upgrade is being developed in a way that is both ecologically sustainable and achieves a balance between social, ecological, engineering and cost factors. Agricultural land is one of a number of important issues that is being investigated during the route selection process.

Field investigations, including constraints mapping, are progressing. The community has been consulted throughout the planning phase to date, with 13 community liaison group meetings held since December 2004. In addition to the community liaison group, a special agricultural focus group was formed for the project in February 2005 with 5 meetings held to date. Community consultation will continue to play an important role as the project team moves forward with finalising the list of route options to be put on display. *(Please refer to Attachment B for details of constraint mapping for agricultural land. Note: This mapping information has been provided to the agricultural focus group and the community liaison group members and will be provided to the larger community as part of the route options display).*

Once a preferred route is chosen, the RTA will work closely with individual property owners to minimise any resulting impacts.

In addition, a corridor workshop was held in early August 2005 with members of the project team and local community, stakeholder and government agency representatives. The

workshop identified that the impact on agricultural land is one of the key values to be considered in developing route options.

d) The potential impact of the upgraded highway on prime agricultural land in the expanded study area

RTA response:

Please refer to the response to item (1C) above.

As with the original study area, agricultural issues will be a key consideration for any routes examined within the expanded study area.

e) The impacts of B-Doubles on the Pacific Highway

RTA response:

A B-Double is defined as a combination consisting of a prime mover towing two semi-trailers. B-Doubles are currently limited in length to 25 metres and 9 axle combinations. The gross mass limit is 62.5 tonnes. The 19 metre B-Doubles have general access to all roads as long as the combination's gross mass is no more than 50 tonnes or a specific load limit has not been placed on a road, bridge etc.

Some 19-metre B-Doubles have been using the highway since 1998, while the 25-metre B-Double was only granted access to the full length of the highway in August 2002. This was following reviews undertaken after the opening of the Yelgun to Chinderah Freeway, which bypassed a length of low standard alignment through the Burringbar Range. The RTA is continuing to monitor the use of B-Doubles and the commercial fleet mix now in operation along the Pacific Highway.

Between late 2002 and late 2004, vehicle monitoring at Port Macquarie has indicated that there has been a shift in the mix heavy vehicle fleet from semi-trailers to B-Doubles (ie. the number of semi-trailers on the highway has fallen since late 2002 from around 1,050 per day to around 900 per day and now appears to have stabilised at the lower number, while the number of B-Doubles has shown a gradual increase from around 180 to 300 in the same period) and there has been no growth in overall heavy vehicle numbers since late 2002.

The number of trucks using the Pacific Highway varies by location. Depending on location there are now between around 1,000 and 1,500 large heavy vehicles (semis and B-Doubles) using the Pacific Highway per day on average.

The RTA appreciates that the larger 25-metre B-Doubles are a cause of concern to some sections of the community. These vehicles carry both local and interstate freight and have provided savings due to the fact that they can carry 1.5 times more freight than the standard semi-trailer. The end result means fewer trucks on the Highway creating improved safety and noise levels.

Having said that, in recognition of community concerns on the matter, the RTA undertook reviews of both noise and safety on the Pacific Highway, the results of which were made available in September 2003 and May 2004 respectively. The Northern Pacific Highway

Noise Taskforce provided a process of further consultation with communities and councils along the northern section of the highway for noise issues associated with B-Doubles. The Taskforce made a series of recommendations for specific action to be taken to improve the regulation of these issues and these are being progressively implemented.

The work undertaken by the Taskforce was also substantially supplemented by the Pacific Highway Safety Review, which included a review of road safety issues as they relate to heavy vehicles and involved consideration of comments from a range of stakeholders and community interests. The recommendations from the Review are being progressively implemented.

B-Doubles represent a significant portion of the heavy vehicle fleet and it is not practical to prohibit their access on a major route such as the Pacific Highway.

f) The impacts of interstate heavy transport on the Pacific Highway and of the mixing of interstate and local transport

RTA response:

Refer to the response to item (1e) above. It should be further noted that while the main objectives in upgrading the Pacific Highway are to save lives, improve travel conditions and reduce travel times, another important objective is to improve transportation efficiency.

The Pacific Highway plays an important role in both providing for inter-capital freight movements and servicing the transport needs of the areas in between. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Freight Movement Survey (of freight moved on articulated vehicles) showed that the amount of freight moved through the North Coast region (i.e. between Greater Sydney and areas further south to southeast Queensland and areas further north) roughly equalled the amount of freight moving to, from or between areas along the North Coast.

Provision of high standard dual carriageway provides road infrastructure that safely handles traffic including interstate and local freight movements. Major benefits including improved amenity have resulted from upgrading the Pacific Highway. These benefits are demonstrated in completed projects such as the Taree Bypass, Raymond Terrace Bypass and the Bulahdelah to Coolongolook Deviation.

In relation to crashes on the Pacific Highway, since the opening of the Pacific Highway to B-Doubles, the number of crashes involving large heavy vehicles has not reflected the increased usage of the route. For example, between July 2002 and June 2005, the number of crashes involving these vehicle types was roughly the same as would have been expected from the monthly average of the previous three and a half year period. However, the comparable number of fatal crashes was slightly higher at 4.4 over the three year post period. Since implementation of measures outlined in the Pacific Highway Safety Review, the number of these fatal crashes has been trending down.

g) The impacts of interstate truck transport on the New England Highway

RTA response:

Traffic volumes on the New England Highway range between under 3,000 per day north of Glen Innes to over 45,000 per day at Maitland. Heavy vehicles (all types) represent between less than 10% of the traffic flow in towns such as Singleton to over 20% in lightly trafficked areas such as near Guyra. These percentages are not expected to change significantly in the foreseeable future.

In 2001, at Uralla, there were around 250 to 270 semi-trailers per day using the New England Highway on average. On peak days during the week, there were about 370 semis. There were also around 110 to 120 B-Doubles on average per day, with around 150 to 160 on peak days.

There is little difference in semi-trailer numbers at Uralla before and after August 2002. Since that time, the number has been quite stable at around 250 per day on average and 350 on peak week days. The number of B-Doubles on the other hand has been affected by changes on the Pacific Highway. By September 2002, the number had dropped to around 70 to 80 per day on average (down around 40 on previous) with around 110 to 120 on peak week days. Again, these numbers have remained quite stable since that time.

Using the urban speed zones as an indicator of the impact on residential areas, the New England Highway in NSW has around twice the length affected (at 79km) than the Pacific Highway. Impact in these areas would be noise and conflicts with local purpose trips.

In relation to crashes on the New England Highway, since the opening of the Pacific Highway to B-Doubles, the number of crashes and fatal crashes involving large heavy vehicles has declined. For example, between July 2002 and June 2005, there were 52 crashes and 9 fatal crashes less involving these vehicle types than would have been expected from the monthly average of the previous three and a half year period.

h) The significance of the New England Highway as a designated national transport route

RTA response:

The New England Highway carries around a third of the large heavy vehicle traffic of the Pacific Highway and there has been no growth in the number of those vehicles in recent years. As stated in 1(g) above, there was a drop in the number of B-Doubles using the New England Highway once complete B-Double access was made available to the Pacific Highway. This indicates that the New England Highway may not have had a major inter-capital transport role even at that time.

The New England Highway has historically been funded by the Australian Government under its previous designation as a National Highway, while the Pacific Highway has generally been funded by the State. However, funding sources do not necessarily correlate with road importance and as traffic counts discussed above indicate, the New England Highway has for some time played a secondary role to the Pacific Highway as a freight transport route. Under AUSLINK, both the Pacific and New England Highways form part of the National Network and from a State perspective, both remain classified as State Highways.

The main reasons for the attraction of the Pacific Highway over the New England Highway are thought to be that:

- Travelling on the New England Highway between capital cities takes longer (from recent discussions with a major freight operator which has measured on average an additional 57 minutes than the Pacific Highway).
- The Pacific Highway is currently 75km shorter than the New England Highway (Beresfield to Brisbane). With ultimate development of the Pacific Highway this difference could increase to around 95km.
- Additional fuel usage on the New England Highway (the same discussions as above indicated that 10% more fuel was used, or 70 litres for a one way trip per B-Double vehicle based on a B-Double fleet comprise typically 550 horsepower 14-16 litre engines and average haulage freight 40-60 tonnes).
- Maintenance costs to trucks are higher for trucks using the New England compared to the Pacific Highway.
- Given the longer travelling time, there is also a difference in fatigue levels for travelling the New England Highway.

Other influences on route choice may be that:

- A third of the Pacific Highway north of Hexham (i.e. 230km) is divided four lane road, compared to only 41km or around 6% of the New England Highway between Weakleys Drive, Beresfield and the Queensland border.
- The New England Highway has 72.9km of 50 and 60km/h speed zoning compared to 38.5km currently on the Pacific Highway.

i) Existing or proposed strategic transport plans that seek to deal with the forecast doubling by 2025 of the NSW freight task

RTA response:

A doubling in freight in NSW would not necessarily result in a doubling in the number of large heavy vehicles using the Pacific Highway as rail and truck technology improvements would have some impact. However, assuming that it does double, the numbers at say 3,000 to 4,000 per day would be easily accommodated by a four-lane dual carriage highway. Therefore, the current strategy of upgrading the Pacific Highway as supported by both the NSW Government strategy and the Australian Government's AUSLINK White Paper, are sufficient responses.

The AUSLINK program also provides funding for improvement of the North Coast Rail line to improve rail freight efficiency.

When compared with the Pacific Highway, the New England Highway carries around one third of the heavy vehicle traffic and has not exhibited growth in traffic.

Therefore, while the New England and the Main Northern railway will continue to play important transport roles for this regional corridor, the Pacific Highway is expected to remain the key strategic interstate transport route for both freight and people between Sydney and Brisbane. The Highway will also continue to serve the ever-expanding coastal communities of the North and mid-North Coast of NSW.

- j) The significance of statements by the Minister for Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources that the Pacific Highway is dedicated as a regional road

RTA response:

This is not a matter for the RTA.

- 2) *The impact of the proposed upgrade of the Pacific Highway between Ballina and Woodburn, with particular regard to the following issues:*

- a) Impact on prime agricultural land

RTA response:

It is recognised that agriculture is an essential economic driver for communities along this section of the highway. The route options for the Woodburn to Ballina project are all being assessed for their impact on agricultural land. One of the key project objectives seeks to “minimise adverse economic effects on the local community and maximise socio-economic benefits...” To that end, all routes have been compared against this criteria and a range of issues including business, land and social impacts have been looked at closely.

Community consultation activities to date have included the establishment of a community liaison group as well as three special focus groups designed to specifically target issues relating to ecology, the sugar industry and flooding, respectively.

In addition, the RTA has accessed available mapping on land of State and Regional significance from the former Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources.

Route options for the project were placed on display for public comment in May and June 2005. In response to requests from some sections of the local community, that display was extended to 4 July 2005. Following the display of route options, a value management workshop was held in July 2005 to consider the route options.

The RTA has consulted closely with the Richmond Valley Canegrowers Association and Broadwater Mill to ensure that impacts on the sugar industry are considered as part of the Woodburn to Ballina project.

No decision has been made on the preferred route at this stage. However, once a decision is made, the project team will work closely with individual property owners and the sugar industry to help reduce impacts (eg. adjustment of alignment, width or route, access, etc).

- b) Impact on flooding in the mid-Richmond area

RTA response:

Flooding is a significant existing consideration throughout the study area for Woodburn to Ballina. As a result, the RTA is working closely with the community, local councils and government agencies and extensive technical studies have been undertaken with the aim of achieving the best possible outcome. Once a preferred route has been selected, further

work, including additional and more detailed modelling, will be undertaken with flooding remaining a key consideration.

Some sections of the community have put forward a “flood-free route”. The RTA is reviewing this route outside the existing study process. While it has some localised flooding benefits, it is not a flood-free route and it has other major associated environmental constraints, including impacts on two National Parks. However, this route is being investigated as part of the ongoing evaluation of route options in the study area.

c) Impact on communities at Broadwater and Woodburn

RTA response:

The RTA recognises the importance of achieving a balance between social, ecological, engineering and cost factors while continuing to provide for future transport needs. In addition to the key agricultural and flooding issues being addressed as part of the development process, emphasis is also being placed on the socio-economic impacts on towns along the highway corridor.

The RTA identified in its route options development report that the social impacts of upgrading the existing Highway through the townships of Woodburn, Broadwater and Wardell are severe and, as such, all options placed on display include bypasses of these townships.

To understand the potential impact on communities, a community liaison group has been formed to obtain vital information regarding community views and concerns as they relate to the upgrading project. This group, together with the project team, has engaged in detailed discussions on social, environmental, economic, flooding, access and safety issues. Other avenues of capturing community input have included the establishment of a project community information centre, project information line, website and ongoing community meetings and project displays.