

**Submission
No 46**

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES: COFFS HARBOUR

Organisation: NSW Farmers Association

Name: Mr Michael Burt

Telephone: 02 6564 2355

Date Received: 9/11/2005

Subject:

Summary

This submission address's points 1 a. of the terms of reference, or more specifically;

The impact of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga highway upgrade on prime agricultural land and the resulting social, economic and cultural impacts of this on members of the NSW Farmers Association (Coffs Harbour branch) and the local Punjabi Sikh farming community. Agricultural land is a significant economic and cultural asset to Association members and the local Punjabi Sikh community (approx 750 persons in the Coffs Harbour LGA). Around 94% of the community are engaged in agriculture and the Punjabi Sikh banana growers represent more than 90% of the industry in Woolgoolga. These growers farm 540 hectares of prime agricultural land.

The RTA's proposed By-pass Option E will carve through prime banana producing land owned and farmed by Punjabi families for over 50 years. Many of these growers are also currently investing significant capital and resources for family- based blueberry enterprises.

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

November 2005

**NSW Farmers' Association
Coffs Harbour Branch
Level 10, 255 Elizabeth Street
Sydney NSW 2000**

Contact

Michael Burt

Ph: (02) 65642355

Fax: (02) 65642357

Email: burtm@nswfarmers.org.au

NSW Farmers' Association Background

The NSW Farmer's Association (the Association) is Australia's largest State farmer organisation representing the interests of over 13,000 farmers – ranging from broad acre, meat, wool and grain producers, to more specialised producers in the horticulture, egg, pork, oyster and goat industries.

Introduction

This submission address's points 1 a. of the terms of reference, or more specifically;

The impact of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga highway upgrade on prime agricultural land and the resulting social, economic and cultural impacts of this on members of the NSW Farmers Association (Coffs Harbour branch) and the local Punjabi Sikh farming community.

Agricultural land is a significant economic and cultural asset to Association members and the local Punjabi Sikh community (approx 750 persons in the Coffs Harbour LGA).

Around 94% of the community are engaged in agriculture and the Punjabi Sikh banana growers represent more than 90% of the industry in Woolgoolga. These growers farm 540 hectares of prime agricultural land.

The RTA's proposed By-pass Option E will carve through prime banana producing land owned and farmed by Punjabi families for over 50 years. Many of these growers are also currently investing significant capital and resources for family- based blueberry enterprises.

The Potential Impact of the Upgraded Highway on Prime Agricultural Land in the Expanded Study Area

1. The impact of the highway upgrade on prime agricultural land

The Punjabi Sikh farming community and the Coffs Harbour/Woolgoolga horticultural industry will be significantly affected by the RTA's preferred Option E by-pass route for Woolgoolga.

Option E will directly affect sixteen Punjabi Sikh owned properties and agricultural enterprises. Some of these are large family operations that provide employment opportunities in the labour intensive banana and blueberry industries. It is estimated that 30% of the Punjabi Sikh community will bear financial loss, upheaval and displacement. Agricultural operations in this region are dominated by the local Punjabi Sikh community, who produce a range of horticultural products namely bananas and blueberries.

The RTA's proposed By-pass Option E will destroy prime banana producing land owned and farmed by Punjabi families for over 50 years.

Some of this land is currently being converted to family- based blueberry enterprises, with significant captail and resources already invested by the local farming community.

Agriculture and land are particularly relevant to the local Punjabi Sikh community (approx 750 persons in the Coffs Harbour LGA) in terms of income and family tradition. This is supported by the fact that approx 94% of the community are engaged in agriculture and that the Punjabi Sikh banana growers represent more than 90% of the industry in Woolgoolga.

Farm enterprises are operated by family units, and the proximity of this land to their homes in Woolgoolga, transport routes, packing facilities and other agricultural infrastructure is crucial.

The direct impacts on the Punjabi Sikh community if Option E proceeds are devastating and include:

- Severance from their primary source of income for about 30% of the community. This will of course result in a major displacement (livelihood, housing, family life, education) and have major flow on economic impact on infrastructure and the wider local economy.
- The loss of 'critical mass' in the remaining local agricultural industry will have a substantial flow-on effect to other reliant industries and service providers. There is the risk of an 'implosion' of service infrastructure threatening the operational viability of those Punjabi and non-Punjabi farmers that remain.

- **Topographic and environmental** impacts on the remaining prime agricultural land and community (Punjabi and non-Punjabi) such as:
 - Severance of irrigation channels and waterways servicing remaining farms
 - Severance of infrastructure such as farm roads
 - Changes to the micro climate such as the creation of wind corridors
 - Increased pollution of rainwater tanks (drinking water for farm properties)
 - Increased buffer zones required for safe spraying of crops and effects of increased motor vehicle emissions (pollution).

2. Social and Community Impact

In selecting route Option E the RTA has failed to acknowledge or consider or investigate the social and cultural impacts on the Punjabi Sikh community:

- Agriculture defines the Punjabi Sikh community. Agriculture is the economic livelihood of the local Punjabi community. Agriculture and land are deeply significant in defining the cultural way of life of the community.
- Agriculture is at the core of family and community activities. It is the shaper of daily life and broader cultural activities.
- Agricultural concerns provide a close structure of support and economic security for the whole family. The family owned banana, blueberry and tropical fruit farms provide year round sources of employment for the whole extended family in an area which experiences some of the highest unemployment in the country.
- A high number of youth (sons) are following strong cultural traditions and inheriting property and agricultural businesses to become significant contributors to the economic cycle. These sons are supporting households with wives, children and parents. By being gainfully self-employed they are able to still meet their cultural and family obligations.

Conclusion

Members of the NSW Farmers Association and the Punjabi Sikh community recognise the Pacific Highway between Coffs Harbour and Arrawarra in the north and around the township of Woolgoolga is in need of an upgrade due cater for increased volumes of traffic travelling on it and that it requires immediate work and improvement to ensure road safety.

However, Association members believe the State government and the RTA must give more serious consideration to the many issues and suggestions raised by the community to improve and revisit the proposal presented by the RTA, including their consultation process.

This submission has outlined the major impacts of the RTA's proposed Option E by-pass on the local horticulture industry, of which the Punjabi Sikh community are major stakeholders.

The RTA's decision completely lacks substantiation for the economic, social and cultural impacts on the Punjabi Sikh community.

Given the impact on prime agricultural land and the horticulture, Option E should be rejected and the Association's Coffs Harbour branch is requesting a wider and more thorough consultation process with the Punjabi Sikh community.

The branch would also like to request the opportunity for the Punjabi Sikh community to present their concerns in person to the Standing Committees of the Legislative Council in Coffs Harbour on 21 November 2005.

Acknowledgements

- Members of Woolgoolga Punjabi Sikh Community, in particular Rashmere Bhatti. Ph: 02 66540242 (AH), Email rashmere@tpg.com.au
- Warren Meredith, Chair of the NSW Farmers Association's Coffs Harbour branch