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Our reference:

Your reference:

15 February 2023

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Gosling OAM MP and Committee Members

RE: Submission for the Federal Inquiry into the Implications of Severe Weather Events on the National Regional, Rural, and Remote Road Network

The Shire of Yalgoo has a workforce of 20 people responsible for 1500km of road, the majority is unsealed across 33,000km² of pastoral country. Within the Mid West Region of Western Australia it is highly likely that the replacement of a gravel road is the result of either heavy mining activity or a storm/flood event.

In the case of mining resources/revenue exist to seal or maintain a road for the life of the project. Construction due to isolated weather events however require funding from a local governments own resources particularly for resilience improvements. It is much easier for more populous areas with less spread out infrastructure to meet the requirements of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements Western Australia (DRFAWA). Rather than rigid thresholds for activation other proportional criteria could be examined. Much like past drought declarations it is nonsensical that weather events be considered in relation to local government boundaries.

The Shire of Yalgoo has seen significant environmental change in recent years. Over the past 3 years rainfall patterns have seemingly reversed with summer storms delivering almost the highest rain on record (annual average in a single day) while winter receives significant lows. Due to the ground not being primed with moisture the summer rains have caused flash flooding and floodways on gravel roads have not held up.



For floodways and sections of road that have become watercourses we have found that low percentages of cement stabilisation help to retain significant amounts of road material in subsequent events. In collaboration with pastoralists and neighbouring local governments we have also found that minor alterations such as bunds across roads help to shed storm water and protect long inclined road sections. This has to be delicately balanced with road safety improvements and standards. It is also important to topographically assess outside of the road reserve so that we do not kill off vegetation. The way water moves over the land is quite noticeable here. For some sections of the sealed Geraldton-Mt Magnet Highway you can see where the road has impeded the natural flow for many kilometers. Vegetation remains healthy on the north side but is sparse and dead on the south side.

We have numerous concerns with the current Disaster Recovery Arrangements timelines and process. The Shire of Yalgoo has been impacted by Summer events for the past three years that have increased in magnitude. The first event, our small crew managed to reinstate all damage within the three month emergency repair window. The second event in early 2021 was submitted to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) and they did not have the resources to assess it in a timely fashion as Cyclone Seroja impacted our neighbours and other state bushfires required assessment. By the time we had another storm/flooding event in early 2022 we still did not have authorization to proceed on 2021 damage.

With faster turn around of this process we could have included cement stabilisation at no cost to the Federal Government saving both the Shire and taxpayers money when further gravel was washed away the next year. Sourcing gravel continues to increase in cost due to distance and approvals. Thresholds and slow reimbursements make cash flow very difficult for small local governments. Due to our large area but small population and rate base we have quite easily ended up in situations where repairs to the road network cost more than our annual \$5 million budget. Apart from some Covid-19 related tree change the population in regional Australia continues to decline. With less workers and places to stay, being able to take advantage of timely opportunities can save the taxpayer significant amounts of money. Mobilization and travel costs for large reinstatements that have to happen all at once due to timeframes and tenders are a waste of money in some circumstances.

While recovery and grant timeframes exist for accountability they make it very difficult to do a good job in remote and rural areas. It is often faster to wait for an injured or sick plant operator to return to work than to recruit and accommodate a replacement. With larger coastal areas and regional centers damaged by Cyclone Seroja and stimulus in the form of Local Roads and Community Infrastructure grants a lack of buying power and

accommodation made projects very difficult to progress in the area of construction and road works. Small towns are then left with white elephants because there will be backlash if available funds are not spent before arbitrary deadlines.

The Commonwealth should allow for projects through disaster recovery funds that do not simply replace like for like. A simpler process needs to be developed that allows for a cost estimate of reinstatement that can then be used by a local government along with their own resources to remake a road to a more appropriate standard. For accountability road assessments could be carried out or contracted out by the government but initial amounts would still be the responsibility of a local government for that work.

Incentivizing local governments to build resilience reserve funds could also be another role of the Commonwealth. 97% of spending in Australia is on recovery with only 3% on resilience. This trend needs strategic top down leadership to shift. Greater resilience of the gravel network provides for more long term sustainable road management and less environmental impact.

Climate resilient corridors may not be the best course of action. Redundancy and diversification may be a better approach through economic analysis and distinct climate zones. We believe that redundancy in the road network is more important than resilience. Infrastructure can be designed to withstand significant impacts but is then wiped away a few years later by more severe and more frequent disasters.

The road connection across the Nullarbor to Western Australia is a perfect example of the bottleneck that can occur when a singular freight route becomes damaged or doesn't operate at capacity. Both road and rail have been significantly affected over recent years. Providing lower cost but still suitable alternative roads means that the states logistics don't grind to a halt as a result of a natural disaster. Additional sealing and further connections to the Outback Way is an example of improving secondary connections into WA. Another example is the Hyden-Norseman Road connecting different key highways.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry on behalf of the Shire of Yalgoo.

Yours sincerely

Ian Holland

Chief Executive Officer

Shire of Yalgoo