



AUSTRALIAN FLEXIBLE PAVEMENT ASSOCIATION

Submission

Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events
on the national regional, rural, and remote road network

2023



ABOUT AFPA

The Australian Flexible Pavement Association (AfPA) is the peak industry body that represent the flexible pavements industry, delivering safe and sustainable outcomes to benefit communities across Australia.

For over 50 years, AfPA has brought together our dynamic and multifaceted multibillion dollar industry that is responsible for the design, specification, manufacture, construction, and maintenance of all forms of bituminous flexible pavements. AfPA's members constitute a diverse array of professional organisations who support the industry and are passionate and committed to advancing flexible pavement technology for the benefit of the road user and broader community.

AfPA members include bitumen suppliers, asphalt producers, sprayed surface operators, major consultancies, suppliers (such as equipment providers, line markers and profiler contractors) and all State Government Road Authorities, and many Local Governments from across Australia.

AfPA's Vision embodies three key objectives:

- to support industry be healthy, safe, innovative, and adaptive to change, acting as a platform for industry sustainability,
- to support the national harmonisation of best industry practices, promoting the benefits of the flexible pavements industry,
- to drive a national culture of continuous improvement.

AfPA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission for the Federal Budget. We are firmly committed to working with all levels of Government towards building a stronger infrastructure future to support the current and future needs of our nation.

FLEXIBLE PAVEMENT INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

Across all aspects of our day-to-day lives, roads bring us together, facilitating all functions of our social fabric and economic activities. The ongoing viability, level of service and safety is entirely dependent on the significant contributions of all levels of Government to new projects and maintenance of the existing network, and equally a skilled competent workforce to deliver on these commitments. AfPA especially welcomes a focus on rural, regional and remote roads, which are so crucial to keeping communities connected across Australia.

We welcome and share the committee's concern for the increasing deterioration of the nation's road network, particularly in regional, rural, and remote areas. The committee's search to understand how road planning and construction may be improved to enhance road climate resiliency and support our communities can be found in an understanding of three crucial themes:

- Fix it first Approach to Roads
- Addressing Skills shortages
- Incorporating Sustainability into Roads

According to the Australian Local Government Association, roads account for 39% of total local government infrastructure, with a replacement cost of \$204B. Of these roads, \$17.8bn are in poor condition, \$16.0bn have poor function, and \$14.3bn have poor capacity. This indicates that 8% of sealed roads and 14% of unsealed roads are in poor condition, function and capacity and close to reaching the end of their useful life (ALGA 2021).

From this information, it is clear that even prior to the catastrophic damage to our roads caused by environmental instability, a new approach to road maintenance was required. A renewed approach to road safety and stability means not only ensuring roads are maintained now but that we instate a proactive approach to future-proofing our roadways. AfPA believes that adopting a fix-it-first approach to road maintenance as well as incentivising a healthy pipeline of young-skilled workers to fill needed positions, and finally ensuring that we do our bit to proactively address the underlying reasons behind weather volatility through increased sustainability are all necessary changes.

AfPA welcomes the Federal Government call for submissions to the 'Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network'.



‘FIX-IT FIRST’ – FUTURE PROOFING AND BACKLOGS

Recent weather instability has highlighted the urgent need to take a longer-term, more sustainable approach to Australia's roads - especially those within rural regions. AfPA's key recommendation to address the deteriorating condition of Australia's roads (especially regional and rural systems) is for longer-term funding commitments and better fiscal coordination to ensure the best outcomes for Australian communities and value for money. Currently, much of the spending is decided year by year which often leaves industry struggling to plan, resource and meet the increasing demands to support urban, regional and remote areas.

Australia needs more sustainable, longer-term pipelines of investment, with a focus on fixing it first. This means not just fixing problems retroactively but ensuring that roads stay well-maintained, making them more resilient to catastrophic weather events. Government allocating more spending for longer periods of time to road maintenance will ensure communities are safely and reliably connected and can drive transport productivity. Whilst we commend the continual spending into new capital projects, we recommend elevating spending, especially within regional and rural areas, as doing so would have significant safety and economic benefits.

The cost of repairing potholes on Australian roads across the country is expected to be nearly \$4 billion in 2022— roughly the same as Australia's entire foreign aid budget. In 2022, roads controlled by 537 councils had suffered more than \$3.8 billion in damage. This is an urgent issue that has the potential to endanger Australian lives and hurt Australia's economic potential. A commitment to maintaining these roads to the highest standards and shrinking backlogs will enable local roads to continue to generate thriving communities.

Regional and remote communities continue to be disproportionately affected by road maintenance backlogs and failures. As the vital lifeline between some communities and urgent healthcare, critical supplies and much more, roads are of the highest level of strategic importance in remote regions.

The most rapid stimulus package that can be implemented is urgently addressing the transport infrastructure maintenance backlog, creating jobs, enhancing resilience, promoting the use of renewable materials and improving road safety.

To address these issues, AfPA recommends:

- Adopting a continuous, routine approach to road upkeep and maintenance that enables a higher level of resiliency to weather events and damage.
- Continued support for rural and regional communities that continue to be disproportionately affected by road maintenance backlogs and damage.
- Working toward addressing the high proportion of sealed roads and unsealed roads that are in poor condition, function and capacity and close to reaching the end of their useful life.
- Focus on sustainable pipelines of road maintenance and innovative repair methods to protect Australia's assets against weather instability which disproportionately effects regional communities.

SUSTAINABILITY

AfPA promotes sustainability on three fronts, our people, the environment and economy. We advocate for the continual improvement of environmental sustainability that works towards circular economy practices. This includes our industry doing its part in addressing the use of renewable materials to control waste. Road maintenance projects provide far greater environmental benefits as opposed to the construction of new roads and ultimately support the reduction of Australia's carbon footprint.

This is achieved by encouraging the reuse of existing construction waste and other renewable engineering materials like glass into maintenance road projects and is a practical way that industry is delivering on the circular economy. With the increase of natural disasters in recent years, from floods to bushfires, it is critical that we work to address the underlying cause of weather instability and climate change. Our industry requires support to work toward the best practices and innovative, sustainable methods of road maintenance and repair.

To address these issues, AfPA recommends:

- Encourage maintenance work as opposed to new projects to reduce emissions and waste.
- Governing bodies and road-related tendering specifications should consistently encourage the use of renewable engineering materials in construction projects.
- Supporting industry to adopt innovative sustainability measures on critical road projects throughout Australia.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

ADDRESSING SKILLS SHORTAGES

Recent events, including ongoing weather instability and the COVID-19 Pandemic, have exposed major shortfalls within our industry – specifically, the availability of trained and skilled workers. This issue is only exacerbated in regional and remote regions. This shortage inhibits the ability to sustain our key infrastructure, our roads. The challenge for our industry, however, is that the work we are completing is not just new projects but often urgent repairs on damaged roads that save lives. The inability of skilled labour to be brought to Australia from overseas has exacerbated this issue even further, resulting in delayed work and unfulfilled critical repairs.

Australia must take the opportunity to invest in a more skilled workforce, one which is capable of applying 'band-aid' fixes to urgent road issues as well as longer-term pipelines of maintenance funding. Both streams will require skilled workers who are ready to respond nimbly to road damage and capable of thinking innovatively and sustainably for longer-term road benefits. AfPA also calls for funding to address the national road maintenance backlog and create stability in the pipeline of maintenance funding to allow businesses to feel confident employing skilled workers stably.

In an effort to attract new entrants to the flexible pavement industry, improve practice and increase the recognition of our members' work, AfPA, in collaboration with industry and supported by State Government, has developed the Australian Flexible Pavement Industry Skills Card (Skills Card).

Bituminous surfacing industry is a specialist trade skill set that ensures the safety of the travelling public and protects the Government's most valuable asset – its roads. On this basis, those who deliver the nation's highest order roads should possess qualifications specific to this industry to ensure quality, safety, long term durability, performance, and workforce sustainability, identifying career pathways through industry. These skill sets have been designed to be transferable between employers and State boundaries and recognised nationally. The qualification needs to be recognised as a trade equivalent that provides confidence to procurers and promotes attraction and retention of talent to the industry. This can only happen if authorities implement the skills card into the procurement process.

As the nation's leading industry association for bituminous surfacing, AfPA has been compiling a significant library of industry specific resources that create a VET unit of competency to be utilised by affiliated RTOs. These resources will be retained and shared through the association to ensure the latest practical knowledge training is provided to the Flexible Pavements Industry.

Under the new Skills Card, Australia's roads are set to become safer and more skillfully built than ever through a set of specially designed part qualifications introduced under the national qualification RII30920 Certificate III in Civil Construction – Bituminous Surfacing, designed to improve the nation's workforce and road building skills. Supporting a healthy pipeline of skilled road surfacing workers, who are fully accredited and upskilled, will not only lead to a more innovative and responsive industry but will also lead to a better-connected, better-functioning economy and society. In this regard, AfPA recommends Government reform pathways via Immigration Laws to access lower skilled visa entry for labourers interested in working in Australia.

To address these issues, AfPA recommends:

- the establishment of better pathways via Immigration Laws to access lower-skilled visa entry for labourers interested in working in Australia.
- introduce the AfPA Industry Card (recognised by the National Skills Commission) as a tender requirement for road contracts to improve safety practices around the handling and working safety of bitumen.
- develop a skilled workforce at home by providing access to secondary and tertiary funded (or other) programs to incite interest in road construction at the grassroots level.
- assist AfPA and the broader industry with building recognised training programs for school leavers or young job seekers.



AFPA STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Our strategic priorities aligning with the Skills Guarantee Discussion Paper are as outlined below:

Health and Safety

AfPA is firmly committed to promoting a continuous improvement health and safety culture across our industry. It is recognised that one of the highest risks for our industry is frontline workers exposed to traffic.

Road workers put themselves at risk to deliver the infrastructure Australian drivers are demanding. Unfortunately, it is some of these same drivers who are putting these workers at risk. It is paramount to AfPA and our members to enable and support industry to continuously improve the health and safety of our people and the communities we serve.

Technology

In flexible pavement construction and engineering practice, AfPA works to:

- Introduce and harmonise best practice
- Support continual improvement, and
- Unlock the potential of industry innovation.

Sustainability

AfPA promotes sustainability on three fronts, our people, the environment and economy:

- AfPA leads the knowledge requirements for our industry in developing skills that underpin the new jobs being created to support Australia's economic recovery and supports the inclusion and growth of diversity.
- AfPA advocates for the continual improvement in environmental sustainability that works towards circular economy practices. This includes our industry doing its part in addressing the use of renewable materials to control waste.
- AfPA advocates for sustainable funding of Australia's most valuable asset – our roads. In particular, the preservation and protection of the major investment that has been made in this asset connect communities and contribute to Australia's economic competitiveness.

Collaboration and Partnership

AfPA drives a partnership culture with all its stakeholders to promote the delivery of outcomes that benefits members and Australia.

Knowledge, Technology and Innovation

AfPA works to promote a continuous improvement culture that demonstrates to members a commitment to best engineering practices and promotes the removal of barriers to innovation. We strive to enhance opportunities for members to implement innovative products and technologies in flexible pavement engineering applications.

AfPA delivers national and international knowledge relating to the best: