



CAPACITY OF ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS ON THE ALICE SPRINGS TO DARWIN RAILWAY PROJECT.

These comments are primarily my personal views and do not have the endorsement of either ADrail or the members of the ADrail joint venture.

Aboriginal people had an interest in, or were affected by the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway Project by virtue of:

- the railway was required to traverse Aboriginal freehold land, and land subject to Native Title claim,
- the project offered the prospect of significant employment opportunities,
- rail traffic would have an impact on the day to day life of people living in communities near the track,
- there would be an unknown economic impact on these communities,
- the railway, particularly construction had the potential to impact on sacred sites

The project decided to address these concerns by engaging with and working through the Northern and Central Land Councils. The main thrust of this email is to suggest that a positive model has emerged in regards to employment and training opportunities that should be built on in future infrastructure projects.

In employment and training ADrail has used the Land Councils as an employment broker for indigenous people. The Land Councils provided the avenue by which ADrail sought and obtained suitable indigenous trainees and employees for the project.

As a result the Land Councils now have experience in this area and have a network of suitable indigenous employees for future remote area projects. This might be nurtured and utilised on future projects to the mutual gain of the project proponents, the Land Councils, and most importantly, indigenous people living in remote communities.

Significant issues that have influenced decision making on the railway project are:

- much of the railway line traverses inalienable freehold land established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976.
- this inalienable freehold Land cannot be sold, and if Aboriginal people wish to deal commercially with their land they are required to obtain the consent of the Federal Minister.
- financial institutions put little store on mortgages over inalienable freehold land because they cannot readily access it for security against a loan, if they wish to, or need to.
- the Northern Territory Government, over a number of years, secured access to the railway corridor by reaching a commercial agreement with the Traditional Owners of the inalienable freehold land required for the corridor, thereby reducing the risks that private consortiums had to allow for in preparing bids for the project.
- the author does not know what the quantum of this risk would be, or if it was ever evaluated, but, believes it would be significant. Not having security over the future railway corridor at the time of inviting expressions of interest and later detailed proposals from private consortia would have been a significant barrier to the project proceeding. The provision of the secured corridor was a critical element for the consortia.
- Asia Pacific Transport, the successful consortium for the railway, placed emphasis on involving Aboriginal people in the project, and on recognising their relationship with the inalienable freehold land traversed by the railway. Consequently, features of the Consortium's bid included:
 - grant of equity in the Asia Pacific Transport Consortium that was given to Aboriginal people, through the Land Councils. Hence, part ownership of the project by Aboriginal people has been established and a share in future profits from the railway will flow to the Traditional Owners of the land as a result,
 - development of a positive employment and training program to provide local Aboriginal people with a chance to secure real employment opportunities available during construction of the project,
 - employment of Aboriginal people to undertake consultation with Aboriginal communities and landowners prior to, and during construction,
 - establishment of an annual Asia Pacific Railway Company Scholarship, of one year duration, to be awarded to an Aboriginal student each year, for 10 years,
 - engagement of the Northern and Central Land Councils to represent and facilitate liaison with Aboriginal people along the line,
 - opportunity for Aboriginal people or organisations to acquire further equity in the project,
 - engagement of local Aboriginal organisations to provide services during construction, wherever possible,

Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee.

- ADrail, the design and construct contractor for the railway line, has been required to pick up most of these commitments.
- ADrail, in turn, has insisted on:
 - use of the Land Councils as "employment brokers" to screen applicants, and offer ADrail with a list of trainees and potential employees, for final selection by ADrail managers. The Land Councils have then maintained contact with those people selected for either training or employment while they were on the job.
 - training only for realistic employment outcomes,
 - use of training organisations already established in the Northern Territory instead of ADrail setting up its own training arm or importing trainers from interstate,
 - training to nationally accredited standards so that any certificates or qualifications delivered by the project had recognition in other areas, and other states,
 - emphasis on training in wide range of skills, eg construction areas in general, rather than railway specific skills,
- Aboriginal people were engaged to act as Mentors to trainees during training, and later in the project, to employees.
- High retention rates for both training courses and employment have been achieved as a result of these measures being implemented.
- A critical benefit and outcome of this has been a strengthening of the Land Council's capacity to act as "employment broker" for future projects. This should be encouraged, and should be taken advantage of as much as possible.
- ADrail has not tried to develop its own (cross-cultural) skills in this area, with potentially negative consequences, instead relying on the Land Councils to bridge this gap, which they seem to have been able to do particularly effectively.
- As a result, the Land Councils are seen by their constituents to have provided a very useful service in this area which should enhance their ability to deliver in a similar way to future projects.
- If the Land Councils can be tasked to deliver a similar outcome on future projects, there is potential for the role of the Land Councils to expand. They might provide a greater number of employees and trainees for the future project and take care of all cultural issues in a manner that smooths the difficulties of marrying the needs of the project with the cultural needs of the local Aboriginal people.

The construction of the railway has been relatively quick, 32 months, with maximum opportunity for employment lasting less than 12 months. This has restricted the chance of gaining traineeships from the project and of training for long term employment.

Our hope is that other projects, such as longer term mining projects, will become viable as a result of the railway. These would then provide nearby remote area communities with the real payoff from the railway, longer term employment and education opportunities for very real job outcomes. The groundwork put down by the Land Councils on this project will provide critical experience in dealing with the issues briefly discussed above, and should be incorporated into these projects.

regards for now,

Duncan Beggs

ADrail - Darwin

Address: PO Box 36566, Winnellie NT 0821.
Phone: (08) 8922 4076
Mobile: 0412 525 666
Facsimile: (08) 8947 0777
email: duncan.beggs@adrail.com.au