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Australia's Transport Network

Introduction

1.1 Australia's freight task is growing rapidly, with freight demand forecast to double by 2020. However, there are real concerns about Australia's national freight transport capabilities, highlighted in Prime Ministerial Taskforce findings of bottlenecks and infrastructure weaknesses, and glaringly evident in cases such as the ships queued off Port Dalrymple, near Mackay, waiting to load coal exports. Inevitably, this begged the question: is Australia's transport network up to the challenge?

The inquiry

1.2 On 16 March 2005, the then Minister for Transport and Regional Services, The Hon John Anderson MP, requested that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services inquire into the integration of regional rail and road freight networks and their interface with ports.

1.3 The Committee received 194 submissions, 44 exhibits and held 30 public hearings in the conduct of this inquiry.[1] This evidence –

1 Listed in Appendices A, B and C.

combined with a steady flow of relevant publications and industry and government developments – provided the Committee with a wealth of information to draw on. The inquiry examined Australia's growing national freight task, its transport networks (including port connections), and the policies and measures required before Australia's transport infrastructure can be considered up to the challenge.

1.4 Over the course of the inquiry, the Committee travelled extensively to conduct public hearings with key stakeholders and carry out inspections at important transport centres, including: Gladstone, Melbourne, Portland, Darwin, Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong, Geraldton, Bunbury, Albany, Esperance, Perth, Brisbane, Mackay and Toowoomba. A number of public hearings were also held in Canberra.

1.5 This program provided the Committee with a greater appreciation of the geographical realities facing many of the transport networks under consideration. It also provided insight into the constraints faced by those networks.

Structure of the report

1.6 Chapter 2 sets the context for the inquiry with a discussion of Australia's freight transport task, especially the rapid growth of that task.

1.7 Chapter 3 examines the capacity of Australia's major ports, in particular the infrastructure available at each one. It also considers how the road and rail connections servicing them are coping with the current freight task and what changes or additions will be needed in the foreseeable future. The chapter includes a list of vital projects brought to the Committee's attention through the evidence and its inspection program.

1.8 Chapter 4 looks at rail issues other than those directly related to a port. It highlights proposed railway improvements that could make a substantial difference to the safety and efficiency of the network.

1.9 Chapter 5, in a similar style to Chapter 4, examines road issues other than those relating directly to port access. Once again, projects showing promise of substantial safety and efficiency improvements are discussed.

1.10 Chapter 6 examines the role of intermodal facilities, their strategic significance and the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to intermodal planning. Initially, the Committee expected the focus to be on regional hubs. However, the preponderance of evidence indicated that it was urban hubs that were assuming the greatest importance to the transport industry, particularly on the Sydney metropolitan network.

1.11 Chapter 7 explores coastal shipping as an option for domestic freight movements, to complement land transport network arrangements.

1.12 Chapter 8 examines the roles of the three levels of government in the provision of transport infrastructure. The evidence given to the Committee clearly revealed the need for greater co-operation and co-ordination between jurisdictions.

1.13 Chapter 9 briefly examines the current discussion on the proposed inland rail line to service the North-South corridor between Melbourne and Queensland. It is supplemented by Appendix E, a summary of the substantial North-South Rail Corridor Study carried out by consultants on behalf of DOTARS.

1.14 Chapter 10 discusses the application of intelligent tracking technology to freight transport movements. It considers potential efficiency and safety benefits from the use of this technology, and the need to foster the development and implementation of an effective national model.

1.15 Chapter 11 comments on the neglect of transport routes that cross borders. It notes the problems of lack of co-operation and uncertainty over financial responsibilities, and calls for a new mechanism to develop transport infrastructure in these areas.

1.16 Appendix A lists the Submissions made to the inquiry; Exhibits are listed at Appendix B; and the program of Public Hearings is set out in Appendix C.

1.17 Appendix D contains a series of maps, mainly of ports, illustrating the infrastructure needed in each case. Appendix E, as mentioned above, is a short summary of the report on the North-South Rail Corridor Study. Appendix F is a matrix showing details about the major ports and their infrastructure needs. Appendix G is a short explanation of how a coal transport chain operates – using the Dalrymple Bay Coal Terminal as an example.