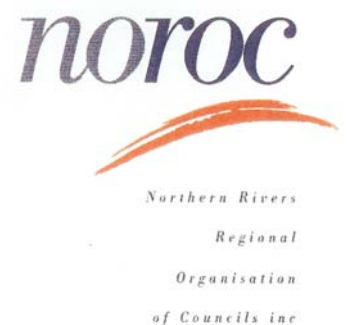


**Submission to the  
House of Representatives,  
Parliament of Australia**

**Inquiry into integration of regional rail  
and road networks and their interface  
with ports**

**Supplementary submission**

**19 May 2005**



**Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils**

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## Supplementary executive summary

The NSW Government recently released its Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy that forecasts by the year 2031, that the population of the Northern Rivers will increase by 26%, or 60,500 people to 289,000.<sup>1</sup>

The Pacific Highway is in desperate need of a safety and freight efficiency upgrade with the configuration of a dual carriageway along its entire length supported.

The problems caused by the poor state of many of the region's roads are exacerbated by the relative absence of any access to commuter or freight rail services.

Regrettably, the closure in 2004 of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line has removed the potential for greater use of this rail link for passengers and freight.

**The region's Councils propose that an unusual situation has developed in the Northern Rivers where there is significant opportunity to use rail to transport passengers and some freight between major population areas and ports, and to use road links for transporting freight to ports.**

This is the reverse argument that applies to many other areas of Australia.

The purpose of this supplemental submission therefore is to reinforce the recommendations made in the initial submission, by calling for Federal Government action as follows:

1. Increase commitment and funding to the region through increased infrastructure spending on the Pacific Highway and other major regional roads, and the expansion of commuter and freight rail services.
2. Work closely with the NSW government to ensure that sufficient funds are commitment to ensure that the Pacific Highway is upgraded to dual carriageway before 2016.
3. Work closely with its state counterparts to help develop significant rail freight interchanges at Casino and Grafton handling bulk freight movements to and from Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney, Melbourne and beyond, both by existing routes and the proposed inland trunk rail route.
4. Work closely with the NSW and Queensland governments to progress the development of commuter rail services linking the major population centres on the Northern Rivers and eventually the Queensland network.

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<sup>1</sup> NSW Department of Planning, Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy, April 2006, p. 4. The footprint for the Strategy excludes the Clarence Valley, an area represented by NOROC.

## **Focus of supplemental submission**

The purpose of this supplemental submission is to draw the committee's attention to the potential to encourage greater use of the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line as a freight *and* passenger route in the Northern Rivers NSW – and to encourage road improvement of the Pacific Highway as a freight interface with ports.

## 1. Northern Rivers NSW in focus

The region is environmentally and culturally diverse and provides a combination of dynamic manufacturing and horticultural industries, a spectacular natural environment and an unsurpassed quality of life. It has a number of regional centres with good access to a growing population, ranging from Tweed Heads in the north, Lismore and Ballina on the Richmond River and Grafton on the Clarence River in the south. These cities are supported by more specialist centres such as Murwillumbah, supporting sugar cane growers, and Casino, a base for the local beef industry.

The Northern Rivers is dissected by three river systems - the Tweed, Richmond and Clarence. It contains national parks and world heritage areas, rainforests and a magnificent and popular coastline. It has a superb natural environment and has created a dynamic social environment.

The growth and expansion of Southern Cross University (with a campus at Lismore, Tweed/Gold Coast and Coffs Harbour) and the North Coast Institute of TAFE, along with rich and diverse social and cultural activities, has seen the region increasingly populated by innovative and creative people.

The following is presented as a snapshot of challenges facing the Northern Rivers region:

### Population Growth and Tourism

The Northern Rivers is experiencing extremely rapid population growth.

Population growth is shifting the region onto a high investment and employment-growth path. It is bringing demand for infrastructure such as building and construction of houses, roads, schools, hospitals and shopping centres – as well as for retail and financial products, medical and health services, teaching, libraries and other community services. Despite planning and infrastructure development, the significant gap that already exists between population growth and investment in hard and soft infrastructure continues to widen.

In January 2004, *The Australian Financial Review* reported that “Everyone...wants to live on the NSW north coast. New highways to the Gold Coast and Brisbane have opened up once-sleepy coastal towns such as Pottsville, Kingscliff and even Byron Bay to the possibility of a daily commute to Brisbane. Recent upgrades to the Pacific Highway have spurred a mini development boom and buyer frenzy”.<sup>2</sup>

Gold Coast Airport experienced 23.5 per cent growth in domestic passenger movements in December 2003/January 2004 compared with the same period 12 months prior. This growth has been attributed to “the growing popularity of the Gold Coast and Northern Rivers as a holiday and lifestyle destination along with the strong growth in airline seats available”.<sup>3</sup> The airport’s General Manager predicts that the growth of value-based airlines, point to a continuation of the growth.

Further, industry officials have estimated that about 400,000 people holidayed between Coffs Harbour and the Gold Coast during the Easter Holiday Period, 2004.<sup>4</sup> Tourism NSW reported that, during this period, the North Coast attracted the second highest number of visitors in the

<sup>2</sup> *Australian Financial Review*, 9 January 2004, “Guide to Beachfront Property”

<sup>3</sup> [www.goldcoastairport.com.au/sub-media/newsdetails.cfm?id=1kTO](http://www.goldcoastairport.com.au/sub-media/newsdetails.cfm?id=1kTO)

<sup>4</sup> *Northern Star*, Tuesday, April 13, 2004

State, after Sydney. The North Coast is now a recognised destination in its own right and represents an alternative to the more heavily built-up South-East Queensland areas.<sup>5</sup>

The above figures show that at peak times, up to 700,000 people may be in the Northern Rivers. In many coastal areas, the population doubles or triples during peak visitation seasons. Considering that infrastructure has difficulty coping with population needs, this additional demand creates enormous stress on water, transport and environmental resources. This influx of people also presents unique dilemmas for our quality of life and future economic development issues.

### **Labour Force**

Characteristics of the Northern Rivers labour force including rising employment, a shift toward part-time employment and proportionally more people employed in the tertiary sector. While tertiary employment is becoming more important, primary sector employment is shrinking. The Northern Rivers has a higher unemployment rate than the NSW average and a lower proportion of people who are either in work or looking for work.<sup>6</sup>

This structural shift means that the lower level of educational attainment in the Northern Rivers compared with the State average may have significant employment implications. Those with lower qualifications are more likely to find it difficult gaining employment in the growth industries that require people with skills such as problem solving, customer service and business development.

At the same time, there has been a dramatic shift in the number of knowledge workers in the Northern Rivers, from 2,000 in 1986 to more than 5,000 in 2005<sup>7</sup>, representing the emergences of new industries and new driving forces in the economy.

### **Major industries and employees**

Originally a predominantly rural area, the Northern Rivers is now a diverse regional economy with an eclectic industry mix. The Regional Development Board lists the major and evolving industries across the region into the categories of primary production, service industries, creative and knowledge industries and evolving industries.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Northern Star*, Tuesday, April 13, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Northern Rivers Regional Profile; A socio-economic profile of the Northern Rivers region prepared for the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, Hunter Valley Research Foundation, June 2003, p2

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.investnorthernrivers.com.au/index.php?pageid=4>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.investnorthernrivers.com.au/index.php?pageid=16>

<i>Primary Production</i>	<i>Service</i>	<i>Creative &amp; Knowledge Industries</i>	<i>Evolving Industries</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• avocados</li> <li>• bananas</li> <li>• beef</li> <li>• coffee</li> <li>• cropping</li> <li>• dairy</li> <li>• macadamias</li> <li>• seafood and fishing</li> <li>• sugar cane</li> <li>• tea tree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• aged care</li> <li>• building and construction</li> <li>• education</li> <li>• finance</li> <li>• health</li> <li>• retail</li> <li>• tourism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• artists</li> <li>• writers</li> <li>• film and film production</li> <li>• computer technology</li> <li>• on-line learning technologies</li> <li>• e-business</li> <li>• design arts</li> <li>• musicians</li> <li>• performing arts</li> <li>• multimedia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ship building</li> <li>• herbs</li> <li>• organic fruits and vegetables</li> <li>• bush foods</li> </ul>

### **Socio-economic profile**

Individual income in the Northern Rivers is generally lower than in NSW. Approximately 60% of households in the region earn less than \$700 per week compared to 39% for NSW as a whole. Nearly 18% of households earn under \$300 per week compared to just 12% for NSW as a whole. For NSW around 50% of households receive an income of over \$700 compared to just 33% for Northern Rivers.<sup>9</sup>

According to the 2001 Census, there is a higher than average proportion of 'couples without children', 'lone parent' families and 'lone person' households in the Northern Rivers region compared to the NSW average, presenting significant social challenges. Lone parent families grew by 21% between 1996 and 2001. Within the region, lone-parent families are almost five times more likely to be headed by a woman than a man.<sup>10</sup>

### **Health**

According to the Northern Rivers University Department of Rural Health, the Northern Rivers is a rapidly growing area with a significantly ageing population and a **higher percentage of Indigenous people in the population than the whole of NSW.**

The region is socio-economically disadvantaged when compared to the rest of the State and the region has experienced higher than average rates of suicide in young males, as well as high levels of risk drinking.

<sup>9</sup>Working Paper for a Regional Industry and Economic Plan. Prepared for the Northern Rivers Regional Development Board by SGS Economics and Planning and O'Neill Pollock and Associates 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Northern Rivers Regional Profile; A socio-economic profile of the Northern Rivers region prepared for the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, Hunter Valley Research Foundation, June 2003, piii

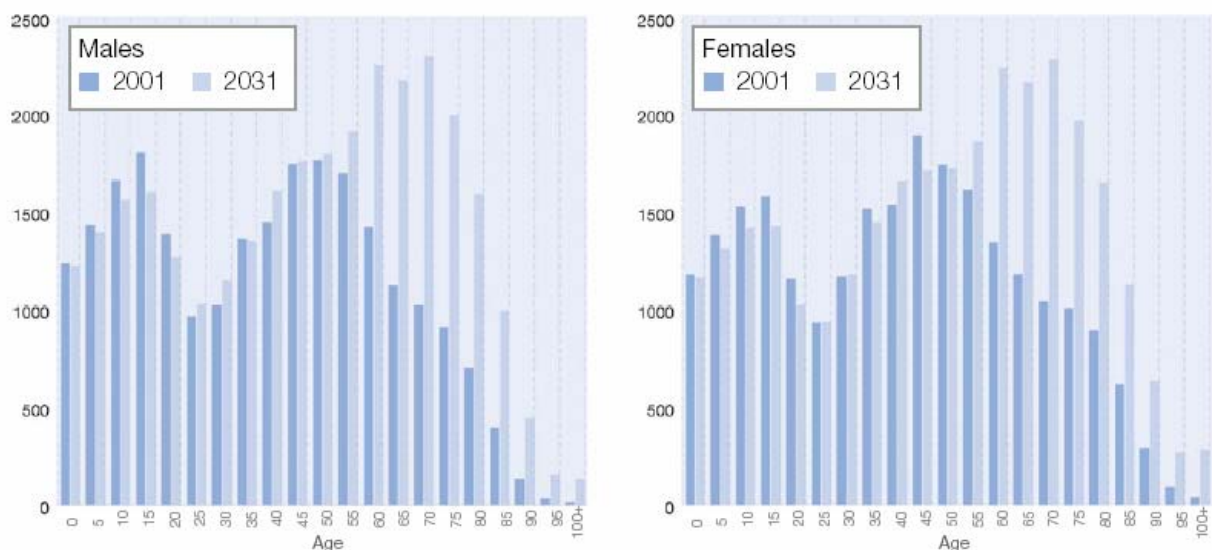
## Ageing Population

Many retirees are choosing to relocate to the Northern Rivers area. Consequently the ageing of the population is particularly accentuated in this region.

Based on proportions, the ageing of the region's population is expected to be most evident in Maclean, Kyogle and Tweed. Based on numbers, by 2026 the largest aged populations are expected in Tweed, Ballina and Lismore. This will put increasing demand on the region for aged-care facilities and services, and qualified staff.

Other issues relate to workers to retirees ratio and impact on regional economy with a decreasing number of workers per retiree; viability of aged care facilities with a low number of beds and the provision of care, health and transport facilities.

Age structure for the Far North Coast and South East Queensland, 2001-2031



Source: NSW Dept of Planning, Draft Far North Coast Strategy, April 2006.

## Infrastructure

Urgent attention is necessary for the region's transport infrastructure needs. Community dissatisfaction is growing in relation to the safety standards on the Pacific Highway – now the major default heavy transport route on the East Coast.

The withdrawal of train services and the inadequacy of local public transport is leading to high levels of community dissatisfaction.

This perceived lack of action on infrastructure planning is having significant environmental, social and safety impacts on Northern Rivers communities and visitors.

As examples:

- The stretch of highway between Grafton and Ballina has crash rates 13% higher than the average, with casualty rates 20% above average



- The Pacific Highway carries 5.4 million vehicles a year, making it one of Australia's most heavily used interstate road corridors by all classes of vehicles. Within the daily traffic flow, about 770 vehicles are heavy transports.<sup>11</sup>

Lack of appropriate transport infrastructure has been identified as a major impediment to sustainable development in a region.

### **Public Transport**

The relatively poorer family incomes and lack of adequate public transport create acute problems for the Northern Rivers. The reliance on the motor car for work creates economic pressure for low income families and it has become critical for a regional transport strategy to be developed.

### **NSW Government's Regional Strategy**

The NSW Government's Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy released in April 2006, plans for future growth for the region to 2031, and summarises predictions of change as follows:

- *Cater for 60 400 more people expected to be living in the Region over the next 25 years — a population increase of 26%.*
- *Allocate 35% of future housing to the three regional centres — Tweed Heads, Lismore and Ballina — and reinforce their role as job and service centres.*
- *Protect the coast by identifying a Coastal Area (east of the Pacific Highway and including Tweed Heads urban areas) which limits urban sprawl by reducing additional future housing from around 75% (based on current trends) to around 60%.*
- *Prevent development in places constrained by coastal processes, flooding, wetlands, important farmland, and landscapes of high scenic and conservation value.*
- *Encourage growth of inland towns and villages by identifying potential lands for new housing and industry to boost local economies without compromising environmental values or quality of life.*
- *Ensure the 51 000 new homes expected to be built by 2031 are provided in a variety of locations, and offer a choice in form and affordability.*
- *Provide rural residential opportunities around existing settlements but not in the Coastal Area unless part of an approved rural residential release strategy.*
- *Cater for the projected 32 500 more jobs needed in the Region by ensuring well located supplies of land for new business and industry, linked to transport. Take advantage of the opportunities arising from the NSW Government's commitment to upgrade the Pacific Highway.*
- *Identify and protect important environmental assets, landscape values and natural resources.*

<sup>11</sup> Australian Government Department of Transport and Regional Services: Transport Programs  
[http://www.dotrs.gov.au/transprog/road/pac\\_hwy/](http://www.dotrs.gov.au/transprog/road/pac_hwy/)

- *Contain areas for potential future development to within Town and Village Growth Boundaries.*

- *Any development proposed for greenfield sites west of the Coastal Area that are outside Town and Village Growth Boundaries must meet the new Sustainability Criteria*

*All major development proposals will be required to fully or substantially contribute to additional regional infrastructure costs, with the contribution determined after taking account of the Regional Strategy, any associated infrastructure plan, and equity considerations.*

## **Regional transport**

The State Government's Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy makes some provision for the development of regional transport, but, it is submitted, lacks leadership and direction in solving the cross-border issues facing our region.

The strategy makes provision for the following:

*The Region is currently serviced by an extensive road network including:*

- *two major north–south corridors on the Pacific Highway and Summerland Way*
- *an east–west link on the Bruxner Highway.*

*There is an estimated 380 million trips made by residents and visitors, and around 20 million tonnes of freight moved within and through the Region each year.*

*The road network is important with approximately 75% of all journeys within the Region by car.*

*Air services are provided by three airports, with both Coolangatta (Queensland) and Ballina providing jet services.*

*The main Sydney–Brisbane rail link passes through the western side of the Region linking the Far North Coast to the east coast passenger and freight rail network, the capital cities and ports.*

*A rail corridor exists between Casino and Murwillumbah, which was replaced by bus services in 2004.*

*An existing bus network services major towns and settlements.*

*A major initiative of the State and Commonwealth governments is the upgrading of the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway standard. The improvements to the road corridor will provide greater transport efficiency and safety for residents, and for intra and interstate movements. The Pacific Highway extends for 140 kilometres through the Region, of which 56 kilometres has been upgraded to dual carriageway and 20 kilometres approved or under construction. The remaining roadway is currently being project-planned for upgrade.*

*The South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005–2026 identifies the future extension of the Gold Coast rail link to Coolangatta airport by 2026 and the planned investigation of significant employment lands and housing at Bromelton, which has direct links to the Summerland Way and North Coast rail line. The Far North Coast Regional Strategy as it is regularly reviewed will progressively identify and link transport needs with the projected population growth and opportunities adjoining in South East Queensland in order to achieve optimal transport planning and coordination.*

### **Outcomes**

*The Strategy identifies regional transport corridors linking the Region's major urban centres.*

*It also seeks to ensure well connected and accessible urban areas that offer residents and visitors more public transport, walking and cycling options.*

### **Actions**

- All regional centres, major towns and towns must provide for a passenger interchange that is well connected to pedestrian and cycle ways.*
- Land use and transport planning must be integrated to minimise the need to travel, and to encourage energy and resource efficiency.*
- Local environmental plans are to recognise and protect the regional transport network through appropriate planning provisions.*
- Protect the Casino to Murwillumbah rail corridor.*
- Continue planning and construction of the Pacific Highway upgrades through the Region.*
- As the Gold Coast rail extension is planned, investigate whether demand warrants the route extending into NSW.*
- Investigate improved road links from the Summerland Way through to South East Queensland (to the future employment lands at Bromelton).*

**One of the major implications of the NSW Government's strategy is that population will be directed towards inland centres – towns and villages that have a poor network of local roads and a poor public transport system.**

**NOROC therefore argues that by investing in a viable commuter train option, major towns and cities will be linked, providing a much-needed service that supports employment in the region.**

NOROC notes that our region is the fastest growing in the State and yet considers that infrastructure is presently not in existence to cope sensibly with this increase. Three major reports – the *Commonwealth Grants Commission Review of the Financial Assistance Act*<sup>12</sup>, the *Hawker Report*<sup>13</sup> and the *Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government (Allen Report)*<sup>14</sup> – have provided extensive evidence that regional and rural

<sup>12</sup> Commonwealth Grants Commission, *Review of the Local Government (Financial Assistance Grant) Act 1995*, June 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Hawker, *Rates and Taxes: A Fair Share for Responsible Local Government*, June 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, *Are Councils Sustainable?* Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government, May 2006.

areas such as the Far North Coast are facing significant financial challenges when it comes to meeting the infrastructure requirements of residents.

The latter report is particularly current – confirming that Local Government in NSW will need to borrow over \$5 billion to overcome its infrastructure backlog and find an extra \$900 million a year to service the debt in order to overcome the annual capital works shortfall.

Of course, the infrastructure task faced by Councils in the Northern Rivers is at least as severe as any other areas of the State.

Several recent reports have highlighted the absence of important infrastructure in the region that ought rather to be enhanced and supported – and specifically, NOROC wishes to bring to the attention of the committee the following: *Pacific Highway Upgrades Interim Report Ewingsdale - Tintenbar and Ballina – Woodburn*<sup>15</sup>, *The Pacific Highway Summit I*<sup>16</sup> and *Summit II*<sup>17</sup>; *Closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah Rail Service Report*<sup>18</sup>; and *The Report into the Country Towns Water and Sewerage Supply Scheme*<sup>19</sup> by the LGSA and Water Directorate in 2005.

### **Recommendation:**

NOROC wishes to therefore recommend to the committee that:

**The Federal Government increase its commitment and funding to the region through increased infrastructure spending on the Pacific Highway and other major regional roads, and the expansion of commuter and freight rail services.**

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<sup>15</sup> Interim report of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 in relation to the Inquiry into Pacific Highway Upgrades, NSW Legislative Council, *Pacific Highway Upgrades Interim Report*

<sup>16</sup> NOROC, Pacific Highway Summit, Friday 6th May 2005 Ballina, *Proceedings*, May 2005.

<sup>17</sup> NOROC, Pacific Highway Summit, Friday, 9th September, 2005, *Proceedings*, September 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Report of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4, *Closure of the Casino-Murwillumbah Rail Line*, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> LGSA and Water Directorate, *Review of the Country Towns Water and Sewerage Supply Programme – the Need to Restore Funding*, June 2004.

## 2. Regional Priority: Upgrading the Pacific Highway

NOROC would like to applaud the Federal Government's commitment to improving and upgrading the Pacific Highway. Both the State and Federal Governments have rightly recognised the significance of the Pacific Highway as Australia's busiest and, perhaps, most vital highway.

Since 1989 when two terrible bus accidents claimed 55 lives and catapulted the condition of the Pacific Highway to national prominence, there has been bipartisan support to improve it. But, sadly, that was more than 17 years ago and the job is only one-third finished. In that 17 years, more than 600 additional lives have been lost on the Pacific Highway.

Both the Federal and State Governments are aware of the costs of road crashes and of the trauma they cause. Governments, the community, business, and green groups all agree that upgrading the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway will save lives and reduce trauma.

The purpose of this submission then is to urge and encourage the Federal Government to accelerate the program of upgrades and improvements. NOROC Member Councils and their communities are committed to ensuring that the Pacific Highway is upgraded to a dual carriageway between Newcastle and the Queensland border before 2016.

There are three central reasons for urging the Government to act now:

1. People are dying. The NRMA reports that in the 18 months between January 2003 and June 2004, 70 people died on the Pacific Highway<sup>20</sup>. At the current rate of construction, completion of the highway upgrades is not expected for between 15 and 20 years. During this time an estimated 800 more people will die.

And the costs associated with this carnage aren't just emotional. As Alan Evans, President of NRMA Motoring and Services, noted recently:

*"Road deaths and injuries shock and devastate the community. They cause families untold grief that sometimes lasts a lifetime. They fill up hospital beds and rehabilitation wards. Our coronial and criminal courts are clogged with case after case of people dealing with consequences of being in a crash."<sup>21</sup>*

2. Local towns are being congested and overrun by trucks. In 2004, the former Minister for Roads, Carl Scully said that between 1995 and 2003 traffic on the Pacific Highway had increased by 42 per cent—from 56,000 vehicles per day to 79,000. Small towns and centres like Bonville, Ulmarra, Woodburn, and Broadwater will not cope with this increased traffic. Increased traffic, especially from trucks, pose tremendous risks to these communities as they attempt to go about their daily lives.
3. Local communities are being held back economically. For many of the communities situated along it, the Pacific Highway represents a major element in the promotion of economic activity. The Pacific Highway upgrades will provide greater access to markets by local businesses, they will significantly reduce the travelling time between Newcastle, the Gold Coast and Brisbane, they will increase tourism, and they will generate job growth.

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<sup>20</sup> Proceedings from the NOROC Pacific Highway summit, May 2005

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## **Towards a Safer Pacific Highway**

The importance of establishing the Pacific Highway as a dual carriageway can not be overstated. In its 2004 Pacific Highway Safety Review the RTA reported that of the 44 fatal crashes on the highway in 2003 most occurred on undivided roads. Fifty per cent of all fatal crashes involved head-on collisions.

But according to the NRMA, head-on crashes can be reduced by 90 per cent by building divided roads. The NRMA reports that over a three-year period there were 213 head-on crashes on the Pacific Highway. Divided roads would have cut this number to just 21. That's 192 head-on crashes prevented, just like that.

A dramatic example of how effectively divided roads can prevent accidents is the Yelgun to Chinderah expressway. The previous Pacific Highway route through the Burringbar range was a notorious blackspot responsible for numerous deaths. From the opening of the new expressway in August 2002 until the end of 2004 there were only 89 crashes and just one fatality.

A potent ingredient in this highway mix is the involvement of trucks in serious accidents. According to the RTA's Pacific Highway Safety Review trucks, which account for just two per cent of registrations in NSW and around 15 per cent of total motor vehicle travel on the Pacific Highway, are involved in more than 25 per cent of all fatal crashes. As the RTA euphemistically puts it, "heavy trucks are over-represented in fatal crashes."

As well as the obvious emotional and psychological trauma associated with road accidents there is the enormous financial cost. As the NRMA's Alan Evans notes:

"Apart from the terrible grief and loss these crashes cause our community, road trauma cost Australia \$40 million every day, or \$15 billion every year. On the Pacific Highway, crashes, deaths and injuries cost the community \$215 million between 2001 and 2003.<sup>22</sup>"

At the current rate of construction it will take another 20 years for the remainder of the Pacific Highway to be upgraded to dual carriageway. Based on current trends we can expect between 600 and 800 people to die on the road during this period at a cost to government and the community of around \$1.5 billion.

## **Freight task on the Pacific Highway**

If concern for saving lives and preventing injury is the primary motivation for upgrading the Pacific Highway immediately, there are important benefits that will flow to both local communities and the Government.

The Pacific Highway is the principal freight route for goods along the eastern seaboard. And while NOROC would also like to see the development and growth of rail to move more freight we recognise that around two thirds of freight is still transported by road. For many communities along its length, the Pacific Highway represents the major access they have to markets.

A better, divided Pacific Highway will not only be safer for all, it will be more efficient. It will improve access to markets on the Gold Coast and Brisbane in the north, and Sydney and Newcastle in the south. Better access to markets means better business and increased economic activity.

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<sup>22</sup> Proceedings from the NOROC Pacific Highway summit, May 2005.

The upgrades that have been completed so far have already yielded results. From 1995 to 2004 upgrades and bypasses on the highway have resulted in travel time savings of between 70 and 90 minutes. Improving the remaining two-thirds of the Pacific Highway will yield even greater time savings.

In addition to better access to markets and reduced travel times, the construction process itself will lead to economic spin-offs. It is estimated that upgrading the highway will result in the creation of more than 1,000 jobs. These jobs will mostly be in regional communities.

NOROC therefore brings to the Committee's attention the potential to utilise the Pacific Highway as an interface with ports, while also improving its safety for all motorists.

**Recommendation:**

**That the Federal Government work closely with the NSW Government to ensure that sufficient funds are committed to ensure that the Pacific Highway is upgraded to dual carriageway before 2016.**

## Regional priority: Encouraging passengers and freight on the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line

In order to solve many of the emergent problems of transport planning in the Northern Rivers, rail must be prioritised and strengthened.

NOROC is calling on the Government to reintroduce services on the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line. These services should be better scheduled to accommodate the needs of locals for inter-regional travel (work, university, medical, social etc), and to accommodate existing and projected tourism demand.

### Immediate Priorities

#### *Local services*

The Northern Rivers differs from a typical regional area given its strong population growth, relatively high population density and strong demand for rail services for commuting purposes.

The Northern Rivers Trains for the Future (NRTF) reports that the region does not fit a typical rural profile, especially in the shires of Tweed and Byron, for the following reasons<sup>23</sup>:

- Population and population densities are generally high
- Growth rates are high (consistently above average compared to other areas)
- Main towns and centres are relatively close to each other
- Local economies are more diversified with strong tourism and service sectors
- Local labour markets are integrated with regional labour market to a higher degree.

Further, NRTF reports that the previous XPT rail services did not adequately meet the commuter needs of the Northern Rivers residents. For example, the previous schedule did not accommodate:

- Casino residents travelling to Lismore for work
- Casino students travelling to University, TAFE and schools in Lismore
- Students, workers, tourists and consumers in Lismore
- Worker and student travellers from Bangalow to Lismore, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby, Brunswick Heads, Ocean Shores and Murwillumbah
- Inbound and outbound workers, travellers, students and consumers from Byron Bay to all points on the line.
- Worker and student travellers from Billinudgel to Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay, Lismore and other points on the line

In the Richmond-Tweed Statistical Division, less than 2% of the workforce use public transport to travel to work. Low utilisation of public transport is due to two factors:

- Unavailability of services; and
- Insufficient government subsidy of fares in comparison to fare structures in Sydney.

It is therefore NOROC's view that there is significant opportunity for increased commuter patronage on the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line with improved scheduling for unmet demand, as well as promotion of services.

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<sup>23</sup> NRTF Response to the Interim Report of Ministerial Inquiry into Sustainable Transport in NSW, 7 October 2003



### *Tourism services*

Casino to Murwillumbah is located in one of the fastest growing regions of NSW, adjacent to the fastest growing region in South-East Queensland that is part of a rapidly growing corridor stretching from the Sunshine Coast, north of Brisbane to Coffs Harbour, NSW.

In Byron Bay, for example, road infrastructure is inadequate to cater for the major influx of tourists. Visitation to Byron Bay has been estimated at 1.7 million per annum and expected to double within a decade. The Casino-Murwillumbah line runs through the heart of the township of Byron Bay and greater utilisation of this existing infrastructure, coupled with an aggressive promotion of services, would help to relieve heavy vehicular congestion during peak holiday times.

There is a significant opportunity for rail to increase its market share through improved scheduling, extended services and the implementation of a strategic marketing campaign.

### *Enhance existing rail infrastructure*

The Casino-Murwillumbah line is constituted by a single standard gauge rail line that ran from Casino through the main centres of Lismore, Bangalow, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and terminated at Condong.

The line services many main population centres and is an asset that should not lightly be discarded.

In order to maximise patronage on the Casino to Murwillumbah line, basic infrastructure must now be upgraded as a priority. For example, serious consideration should be given to restoring the Bangalow railway station, replacing the Billinudgel station and replacing or fixing wooden bridges.

### *Rail Freight*

An opportunity exists for the NSW Government to work with local government to establish and promote regional rail freight depots, including a terminal at Casino that acts as a hub for regional export bound for Brisbane port.

Stretching 800 km along the eastern seaboard, the Pacific Highway is the main access route between the fastest growing non-metropolitan centres in New South Wales and southern Queensland.

There are many instances where freight currently transported by road could be transported more efficiently by rail, including containers and logs. Materials required for road construction (eg fly ash from Brunswick Heads bypass) could also be transported by rail, alleviating pressure on the Pacific Highway and arterial roads.

The Australasian Railway Association Inc. (ARA) reports that one freight train between Melbourne and Sydney replaces 150 semi-trailers and saves 45,000 litres of fuel and 130 tonnes of greenhouse gases compared with road haulage<sup>24</sup>.

The ARA also reports that rail is twice as energy efficient as road even after fuel use has been included for rail line haul, road pick-up and delivery from rail terminals, manufacture of transport equipment and construction of roads and railway lines. It reports that Australia's domestic freight task is expected to double by 2020. In the same period, fuel consumption by articulated trucks is forecast to increase by at least 70% and greenhouse gas emissions from articulated trucks are forecast to increase by at least 75%.

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<sup>24</sup> [www.ara.net.au/society/environment/php](http://www.ara.net.au/society/environment/php)

In 1991, the Senate Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology found that rail freight services could help Australia achieve large savings in fuel consumption and carbon dioxide emissions.

#### *Develop an Integrated Northern Rivers Transport Blueprint*

In order to develop a blueprint for the provision of future public transport in the Northern Rivers, careful consideration must be given to the unique needs of the Northern Rivers region. We are, effectively, an outer part of the Brisbane-Gold Coast urban area, and public transport planning must include a long-range vision to link the communities of Queensland and NSW in a meaningful way.

The population growth rate in the Northern Rivers is comparable to that of both Wollongong/Illawarra and Newcastle/Hunter. It is therefore clear that the Northern Rivers will demand the provision of comprehensive public transport infrastructure of a level comparable with those areas.

Consideration must be given to a range of transport options, with reference to successful case studies from around the world and consulting transport experts both nationally and overseas. The UK 'Rail' publication reports that in Germany, for example, new trains, refurbished stations and integrated buses have rejuvenated rural railways, where high frequencies have led to vastly improved traffic and... lower subsidies.<sup>25</sup>

Consideration could be given to a range of new options including urban light rail and metro systems as well as urban motorways, as part of integrated public transport solution for the Northern Rivers and surrounds.

Failure to adequately plan the Northern Rivers transport mix will not only destroy the future potential for cross-State integration, but also severely affect the future viability of the rail network as a whole, as commuters move away from rail to concentrate on other options. There will undoubtedly be social and health implications for those who rely on rail to access Sydney-based medical services, and to visit family and friends.

#### **Medium-Term Priority**

Establish Rail Link Between Murwillumbah and the Gold Coast

NOROC supports calls for an urgent study into the existing rail line to the Gold Coast, enabling commuter services to be connected with Brisbane services.

Three areas of demand were considered by Lismore City Council as part of councils' response to the Parry Inquiry into Public Transport in NSW. These indicate the potential patronage on the Casino-Murwillumbah line resulting from a connection to the Gold Coast line at Coolangatta, and are reported below<sup>26</sup>:

#### *Estimates for Patronage*

Tourism inbound to Northern Rivers	950
Commuting to South- East Queensland	2,700
Other visitation to South- East Queensland	1,200
<u>Total Daily Patronage</u>	<u>4,850 trips per day</u>

Attached as Appendix 2 is a breakdown of the assumptions and estimates used in these calculations. The calculations are indicative only.

<sup>25</sup> 'Rail Comment', Rail 457, March 19-April 1 2003, p3.

<sup>26</sup> Submission to the Parry Inquiry into Public Transport in NSW, Lismore City Council, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2003, Manager – Economic Development and Tourism, Andrew Lovett

### Queensland Government Commitment

It is clear that increased patronage on the Gold Coast line would result from the connection from Condong to Coolangatta. Involvement and funding from the appropriate Queensland Government authorities is desirable.

Medium-term plans are already in place for upgrade and augmentation of the Gold Coast line that currently runs from Beenleigh to Robina. The line is at capacity and will be duplicated and extended to Tugun. A further extension to Gold Coast Airport at Coolangatta has been planned and is subject to determination of the Tugun bypass route.

An Impact Assessment Statement ("IAS") has been carried out for the initial component of the extension from Robina to Tugun. The following table is an excerpt from the IAS<sup>27</sup>, which shows the projected patronage on the various segments of this line.

<i>Line Segment</i>	<i>Year 2011 Patronage*</i>	<i>Year 2021 Patronage</i>
Helensvale to Nerang	16,680	22,080
Nerang to Robina	9,440	15,140
Robina to Reedy Creek	8,180	13,080
Reedy Creek to Andrews	7,780	13,180
Andrews to Elanora	7,880	13,280
Elanora to Tugun	6,280	11,180
Tugun to Coolangatta	2,640	4,840

*\*Note: Recommended year of opening of the rail extension from Tugun Station to Coolangatta Station.*

There would be significant mutual benefits by having an integrated approach. If residents of the Northern Rivers were able to visit or commute to Brisbane/Gold Coast via a Queensland suburban rail service, then there would be significant social, economic and environmental benefits. Similarly, tourists would be able commute by train from Coolangatta airport to Byron Bay.

### Future action

Governments must pursue a long-term strategic approach to link the Casino-Murwillumbah line with the Gold Coast rail service.

Regional rail services have suffered from a lack of investment over many years. The State Government now has an historic opportunity to reverse this situation in the Northern Rivers region.

In order to achieve the priorities outlined in this document, the following recommendations are made:

- Re-introduce rail services on the Casino to Murwillumbah line to meet existing demand for commuter and tourism services;
- Instigate the development of an investment programme for bringing infrastructure, particularly rail bridges, up to an acceptable standard;
- Instigate appropriate business management and planning aimed at increasing the scope, availability, utilisation of both inter-regional and intra-regional rail services in this area (including the integration of feeder services and park and ride options);

<sup>27</sup> Robina to Tugun Impact Assessment Study: [www.pb.com.au/robina/Background\\_FrameSet.htm](http://www.pb.com.au/robina/Background_FrameSet.htm)

- Instigate discussions with Pacific National, Interail and local freight companies to explore rail freight options;
- Undertake immediate planning for connection of the line from Condong to Coolangatta (incorporating feasibility studies, business planning and environmental impact statements);
- Develop a long-term vision for the further development of the rail corridor from Gold Coast Airport to Casino over the next 50-100 years, incorporating the implementation of dual gauge, dual carriageway and electrification;
- Include the enhancement of regional development in decision criteria for the selection of transport projects.

### **A final word...**

Historically, there was a rail service running from Brisbane to Coolangatta. During the 1960s the services were terminated and the rail line pulled up. The Queensland Government is now in the position of having to resume large tracts of land and redevelop previously available infrastructure. Not surprisingly, the Mayor of Gold Coast City Council has warned the NSW Government to take history into account when considering the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line<sup>28</sup>.

NOROC believes that Governments are faced with a momentous historical decision. To allow the Casino to Murwillumbah line to run down is to repeat short-sighted mistakes of the past, while an investment in rail at this time will assist in providing a modern and efficient transport solution for the Northern Rivers that provides new impetus for economic development with subsequent social and environmental benefits.

### **Recommendation:**

NOROC therefore asks the committee to recommend the following:

**That the Federal Government work closely with the states to help develop significant rail freight interchanges at Casino and Grafton handling bulk freight movements to and from Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney, Melbourne and beyond, both by existing routes and the proposed inland trunk rail route.**

**Work closely with the NSW and Queensland government to progress the development of commuter rail services linking the major population centres on the Northern Rivers and eventually the Queensland network.**

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<sup>28</sup> *The Gold Coast Bulletin*, 27 September 2003, p26. "Rail line a vital link to Coast"