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Your ref: Draft Riverina Murray Regional Plan



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Submission: Draft Riverina Murray Regional Plan 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the draft Riverina Murray Regional Plan.

This submission responds to *Goal 2 Improved regional transport networks and utility infrastructure to support economic activity*; in particular *Direction 2.1 Enhance the region's freight networks through coordinated investment*, *Item 2.1.1 Identify and prioritise pinch points in the freight network* and *Action 2.2.2 Identify and protect future rail corridors*.

The draft plan makes significant reference to connections to the Port of Melbourne being critical for the region's economy, and that maintaining connections and access to the port will become increasingly important as agricultural production and output increases into the future.

This submission asserts that the lack of a geographically direct connection between the Western Riverina and Melbourne is a constraint, in that it reduces the competitiveness of rail.

The draft plan and the map on page 44 of the draft plan; *Figure 11 Potential Freight Network Improvements* does not include a rail connection between Narrandera and Tocumwal; as a potential infrastructure solution even though there is an existing rail corridor.

Narrandera Shire Council (NSC) is in the Western Riverina region of NSW. NSC is the host agency for the Food Bowl Inland Rail Alliance (FBIRA), an alliance of nine Councils comprising Berrigan Shire Council, the former Jerilderie Shire Council (now Murrumbidgee Shire Council), the former Urana Shire Council, Leeton Shire Council, Griffith City Council and Narrandera Shire Council in New South Wales and Greater City of Shepparton, Moira Shire Council, and Mitchell Shire Council in Victoria. The Alliance has been advocating the Food Bowl Route for the southern alignment of the Melbourne to Brisbane Inland Rail project. It is noted that the Inland Rail Implementation Group have recommended the Albury route for the southern alignment in their report to the Federal Minister for Infrastructure in 2015. However, this still leaves a significant freight challenge for the Food Bowls of the Western Riverina region and Goulburn Valley in Victoria.

The Western Riverina region and Goulburn Valley generate some \$10 billion in annual economic output. Agriculture is the largest sector and the key commodities produced include grains (including rice), cotton, wine, dairy, meat and horticulture

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(including citrus and nuts). Demand studies calculated that the region produced approximately 3.6 million tonnes of bulk and containerised freight in 2015 (AECOM 2014 Food Bowl Route – Rail User Economics and Freight Commerce). The AECOM study also found that demand for freight in these Food Bowls is projected to almost double by 2035.

The majority of export freight movements from the Riverina and Goulburn Valley are to Melbourne with over 80% of identified containerised demand and 69 percent of bulk freight demand being moved through the Port of Melbourne. Freight transport costs are a significant consideration for producers. Current freight transport options are largely reliant on road transport.

The existing rail network in the Western Riverina does not follow a geographically direct path to Melbourne. A more direct path could reduce the distance travelled by approximately 130 kilometres from 640 kilometres to 510 kilometres (*Narrandera Shire Council 2012 Narrandera to Tocumwal Rail Line Infrastructure Revamp*).

A mode shift from road to rail could reduce externality costs associated with freight transportation. These costs include additional road maintenance costs, increased congestion related costs including 'pinch points' on particular roads such as the Newell Highway and Goulburn Valley, and environmental costs associated with increased emissions.

The following benefits could be realised through the enhancement of freight transport options across the Western Riverina region and Goulburn Valley:

- a) Direct cost reduction benefits to business;
- b) Reduced environmental externalities;
- c) Reduced congestion, reduced road maintenance costs and improved road safety.

Investing in freight infrastructure in the Western Riverina region and Goulburn Valley aligns with the strategies and policies of the Victorian, NSW and Commonwealth Governments. This includes the Infrastructure Australia's Australian Infrastructure Plan (2016), the Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Council's Regional Freight Transport Plan (2015), the NSW Freight and Ports Strategy (2013), the NSW Government's Economic Development Strategy for Regional NSW (2015), NSW State Infrastructure Strategy (2014), the Victorian Government's Victoria: The Freight State report (2013), and the Northern Victoria Regional Transport Strategy (2009).

Due to the cross border nature of the two regions, any action would require co-ordination between the New South Wales, Victorian and Commonwealth Governments.

An option for further investigation includes the creation of a fit for purpose, standard gauge regional freight link between the Western Riverina and Melbourne, via the Goulburn Valley, using the existing rail alignments. This involves:

- I. Restoration of the disused Tocumwal to Narrandera standard gauge rail line in NSW, and
 - II. Standardisation of the broad gauge Mangalore to Tocumwal rail line in Victoria.
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The Victorian Government has recently released a discussion paper titled *All Things Considered Exploring options for Victoria's 30 year infrastructure strategy*. It is noted that *All Things Considered Item 13 Improve the efficiency of freight supply chains* identifies that regional rail gauge standardisation (RRF) is a concept that requires further development in Victoria.

Obviously further work needs to be undertaken to:

- a) Complete a full demand analysis that covers gaps in the existing knowledge base;
- b) Further develop the project options and undertake detailed costings;
- c) Quantify the benefits of each option;
- d) Assess private and public sector funding and financing options, both for further studies to develop the project and ultimately to deliver the infrastructure.

However, with reference to this very important strategic regional planning document, this submission recommends that the currently disused Narrandera to Tocumwal rail corridor should be noted on the Figure 11 Map on page 44 as a potential freight network improvement, particularly given the Victorian Government's plans to continue to standardise the current broad rail gauge lines across their state including at some stage the Mangalore to Tocumwal line.

In addition, the Melbourne - Brisbane Inland Rail Implementation Group's report to the Australian Government in August 2015 says on page 57 "The Implementation Group finds that adoption of the Albury route for the north-south alignment does not preclude future development of an additional track linking Shepparton with Narrandera through to Parkes. The extension of Inland Rail through the Riverina and Goulburn Valley food bowls, or elsewhere, could occur if in the future there is sufficient demand to economically justify further investment."

Keeping the current Narrandera to Tocumwal rail corridor on the Potential Freight Network Improvements Map (with supporting commentary) is crucial for taking up future opportunities including when the Victorian Government extends the rail gauge standardisation program right across the state.

This submission also provides a comment in regard to *Direction 2.1 Enhance the region's freight networks through coordinated investment and Item 2.1.1 Identify and prioritise pinch points in the freight network*.

Bypasses and bridge crossings are noted in the draft plan. However the plan does not address the increasing pressure from primary producers wishing to more efficiently move produce to key locations using road-train or B-double transport. A fragmented road network in terms of connectivity between areas for higher mass limit vehicles is also a potential impediment to the existing freight network.

This submission also strongly supports *Goal 1 A growing economy supported by productive agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources; in particular Direction 1.2 Manage productive agricultural lands in a sustainable way, Item 1.2.2 Establish a strategic planning framework that protects the productive values of agricultural land and manages land use conflict*.

Narrandera Shire Council endorses the need to protect rural land uses and dependent industries and communities. The aim to provide certainty and consistency for new and existing agricultural industries is strongly supported by Council.

Council would like to acknowledge the significant consultation with stakeholders that has occurred to develop this draft Riverina Murray Regional Plan. Departmental staff have really listened to stakeholders and produced an excellent draft. Well done to all.

If you have any further enquiries concerning this matter, please contact me on T 02-6959-5500, or E council@narrandera.nsw.gov.au.

Yours faithfully



Judy Charlton
Chief Executive Officer

