

Submission to North – South Rail Corridor Proposal
By Phillip Mackenzie
President Tweed Rail Society and Manager of Mirrabook Rail Services

Recital

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Executive Summary

The principle of a North-South Inland Rail Corridor is an excellent one and is a concept long overdue. There are, however, a number of questions that need to be asked and answered in relation to the timing of this study.

This study must produce an outcome that achieves a triple bottom line benefit not only to the freight forwarders in the major capital cities but must also provide benefits for the broader communities along and near the proposed route in terms of freight movements and passenger services. It should give residents in country regions access to a safe, reliable alternative means of transport, improve transport safety and efficiency, reduce transport costs and times of delivery as well as bring improvements to the environment by removing numerous trucks from the nations roads, thereby saving on pollution, wastage of materials such as fuel and tyres etc.

This study does not reveal the true cost of constructing extensive sections of new rail lines whereas existing rail line corridors would suffice in the main, save for sections that undoubtedly do require upgrading and some realignment. The cost of land acquisitions is not included in the costs of building new lines, the cost to the environment considered in terms of providing the steel for hundreds of kilometres of new rail lines plus sleepers and fixtures etc.

An inland rail corridor must not only provide for freight. It must also allow a conduit for the free movement of passengers along the corridor. This will improve the productivity of the line and the people who use the line in that they will have opportunities to do business or take a holiday whereas they may not have that opportunity at present.

Tourism will be a big winner if an inland passenger corridor was also created along with the freight component. The New England is a treasure trove for tourists, who in the main only access the region by car. Towns like Armidale will benefit in that students will have better transport access to university. Centres such as Dubbo, Parkes and Wagga Wagga are major tourist towns already and will embrace a new inland passenger rail service between the major cities.

Introduction

I have been involved in railways for over forty years and have witnessed both significant improvements as well as numerous downgrades of rail services particularly in NSW. Topography, the environment, under funding of rail and archaic infrastructure have all taken their toll on rail's share of the overall percentage of freight being transported between Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. An inland rail highway will undoubtedly be necessary to carry the ever increasing share of this intercapital freight.

Mirrabook Rail Services was established as a rail consultancy enterprise in October 2004 with the aim of assisting various levels of government and rail enterprises of all descriptions to improve both passenger and freight operations predominantly in, although not limited to, NSW. The major focus is on NSW North Coast rail operations. As a result the Tweed Rail Society was established in 2005 in order to seek the reopening of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line for the purposes of establishing both freight and passenger services on the line and to see the eventual link up of NSW rail services to Queensland rail services at Coolangatta Airport.

It is with great interest that I have had the opportunity to read the Ernst and Young report into the proposed North–South Rail Corridor between Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

There are undoubtedly many advantages and disadvantages in regard to selection of one or possibly more routes across country. There is cost, time to construct, management, topography, and weather conditions to consider. Existing infrastructure and generation of freight from not only the major cities but also other destinations enroute should also be taken into consideration when determining final routes and corridors. In addition the route should also be looked at from the potential for conveyance of passenger trains as well as freight together with general and environmental benefits to both the broader community and overall benefits of using rail as opposed to road.

Overview of Rail in NSW, Victoria and Queensland

Before proceeding with the actual study it is important to establish what the current situation is with the rail system in Victoria, NSW and Queensland. All three states have three separate gauges:

- Victoria – 5' 3" broad gauge,
- NSW - 4' 8 1/2" standard gauge,
- Queensland – 3'.6" narrow gauge.

The various rail gauges has been the Achilles heel of Australian railways for over a century. It has cost this country enormously in time expense and numerous inefficiencies over the years in the movement and delivery of freight and inconvenience to passengers. In the 1960's efforts were put in place to begin to correct this mess in which Australian railways found themselves. Standardisation of major trunk routes between the capital cities was the key to assist railways to move forward.

Other bottlenecks still occur in the rail network particularly in and around capital cities between freight and numerous commuter trains. Sydney has a ban on freight movements during peak hours so freight has to be timed outside those hours. Not a satisfactory situation. Construction of dedicated freight lines will assist in alleviating this problem. However interstate freight is not exempt from these restrictions. This results in delays to customers and potential loss of business from rail to road.

There is growing anger and frustration within the community about the number of trucks on the nation's roads, particularly between Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Road freight carries approximately 60% of interstate freight between Sydney and Melbourne and slightly more in percentage terms between Sydney and Brisbane. Trucks are ever increasing in size and in number. There are long hours that truck drivers have to endure and there is still an element of 'cowboys' or self medicated truck drivers on the road.

The NSW rail system has been in a state of general decline since the early nineteen seventies. Many rail branch lines have closed, depots removed or downgraded. With the exception of daily passenger trains on main lines there are few country passenger services still in existence. The majority have been replaced by unpopular bus services. With the introduction of the XPT services in NSW many intermediate stations on main lines were left with no passenger rail service at all as RailCorp removed many of these stations in order to 'speed up' these services. During this process many crossing loops and other rail infrastructure was removed by RailCorp in order to 'streamline' operations.

To make matters worse successive state governments have placed the NSW rail system under various management models (with subsequent name changes) that often became unworkable, so another model had to be adopted. The NSW railways operated under the NSW Government Railways banner, then it was the NSW Transport Department, then RailCorp with infrastructure separated from operations, then later reintegrated after a number of accidents. RailCorp then divided into CityRail and CountryLink with the freight operations sold off at well under market value to Patricks who established Pacific National freight operations in NSW.

The final chapters in the saga of NSW rail is the leasing of a number of main lines in 2004 to ARTC – a commonwealth entity set up by the federal government to carry out works under various Auslink programmes to improve the efficiency of rail operations across Australia. This is important as this will effect how the proposed North – South rail corridor will be constructed and operated.

Without going into any further detail it is clear that the NSW rail system and management and operation of it is far from satisfactory. In fact, the rail system is a disgrace in terms of management, and overall operation, in 2007!

Much of the comment in the North-South corridor study relate to current and proposed work being undertaken by ARTC to bring the eastern states rail network up to the task of carrying the expected doubling of the freight tasks between the three major capital cities over the next 15-20 years

ARTC has leased the major trunk routes in NSW from the NSW State Government for a term of 60 years in return for upgrading the rail network.

ARTC leases the lines: Broken Hill to Parkes, Melbourne to Sydney, Sydney to Brisbane via Casino, Cootamundra to Parkes, Parkes to Dubbo via Narromine and Dubbo to Werris Creek, Newcastle to Werris Creek and Muswellbrook to Binnaway via Gulgong.

In the Study ARTC is already carrying out significant upgrading of tracks and infrastructure along many of these routes. Most notably was the recent replacement of the 100 year old iron bridge over the Murrumbidgee River at Wagga Wagga. This is all taxpayer funding from federal treasury. This funding belongs to the people of Australia and as such it is expected that there will be significant dollar benefits from these improvements. This will only occur if these improvements do indeed carry the freight increase as projected and along the lines currently being improved, not other rail lines that may or may not be built in the future.

Given the above it must surely be incumbent upon both ARTC and the Federal Government to decide upon the route that would provide the most benefit to the most people in the least time at the best dollar value. As ARTC controls and is developing improvements along the rail routes from Melbourne to Cootamundra, Parkes, Dubbo via Narromine and Werris Creek via Binnaway, this surely seems the logical beginnings of the route to select as an appropriate inland corridor. In addition, ARTC controls the coastal mainline between Sydney and Brisbane via Casino. This leaves a gap of ARTC control between Werris Creek and the Queensland border and from the Queensland border to Brisbane. However as ARTC has control of the coast mainline this shortens the distance required by ARTC to construct a new standard gauge line into Queensland. It is inevitable that a standard gauge line will have to be constructed somewhere in the northern part of the rail system study area and this has been identified in the review section of this submission. Effectively a link line from the New England to the NSW Northern Rivers is the obvious solution for reasons set out in the review section.

Review of the North – South Corridor Study

Upon reviewing the North – South Rail Corridor Study by Ernst and Young it is appropriate to:

- A. Raise the following questions and
- B. Make the following comments.

A. Questions

A1. Questions raised from this study principally revolve around the timing of this report in respect to already known decisions.

Therefore, why is this report being issued now when it is well known within the rail industry that a decision to proceed with the far western option was known several months ago?

A2. This study appears to only indicate the cost of construction of any new rail line or upgrades.

Therefore in regard to the far western option the real cost could be significantly higher than stated once land acquisitions are included as well as the time taken to acquire the necessary properties on which to lay new track and establish a new rail corridor.

So what is the real cost in terms of dollars to build the far western route from scratch and the time to build this route given the necessary land acquisition?

A3. In addition, given the above question, only an outline statement has been made in reference to the far western option. No map of the proposed far western option is included in the study.

Why has no map been provided in respect to the far western route proposal?

B. Comments

1. The principle of a North – South Rail Corridor is an excellent one and is long overdue. Such a rail corridor will undoubtedly provide many significant benefits to those freight forwarders in the major capitals and to many producers / manufacturers, suppliers and consumers along and nearby the selected route.
2. It goes without saying that once this route is finally operating it will provide a much better and safer means of conveying the bulk of the nation's freight task than by current road freight. However, a number of basic yet important considerations need to be made before a final determination is made in respect to the rail route itself together with the resultant consequences of the final route to be chosen.

Considerations such as where does the freight originate from and where is it distributed to in the most efficient method and least time frame is effectively the basis of this report. Other considerations of importance include eliminating or minimising bottlenecks along the selected route(s), minimising environmental impacts, safety in the transport and delivery of freight and the cost of construction and time of construction are also important.

3. Although it is believed that the Far Western corridor is the preferred route for this project, I do not believe this is the best option in the short to medium term. Surely it would be far more cost effective and time efficient to reinstate the existing rail from Dumaresq to Tenterfield (on the now closed Armidale to Wallangarra line.) Irrespective of which route is finally chosen, a standard gauge line will have to be built on the Queensland side of the project. The shortest route from the west of Brisbane is via Stanthorpe and Toowoomba. Following approximately the existing narrow gauge line would keep construction costs to a minimum although a number of deviations would be necessary for the standard gauge line.
4. A western or far western route would require significant new route construction and link ups to existing lines particularly between Narromine and Moree, as well as a completely new standard gauge line from North Star in NSW to Goondiwindi and across to Brisbane in Queensland. This would add to significant construction costs as well as time factors to build

these new lines. In addition, all these western options still require crossing the Great Dividing Range in Queensland. The mountain ranges in this region of Queensland are of substantial height above the coast to warrant significant construction costs to traverse using standard gauge track.

The cost of traversing the ranges into the interior is one of the reasons why narrow gauge line was chosen in Queensland in the first place.

5. Although reinstating the Wallangarra line would restrict the tonnage per train compared to a flatter westerly route, with modern electric signalling the number of trains traversing this line would be significant compared to a single line under mechanical signalling operation. It may also require a banker loco to assist trains over the ranges in both directions due to the terrain.
6. An option that has not been considered by Ernst and Young in its paper is the option of constructing a rail link line between Tenterfield and Casino. This 100 kilometre section would be the only new line needed to be constructed if the New England line was used once the section from Dumaresq to Tenterfield was upgraded (approximately 180 kilometres.) It would be the quickest and cheapest of all the western 'options' to build. The route from Tenterfield to Casino was actually chosen as a rail route approximately 80 years ago and a section of line was commenced from Casino but was abandoned in 1930 ("Forgotten Railways of the Northern Rivers" by Ian Kirkland). Earthworks were constructed almost to Mumbulgum on the Bruxner Highway west of Casino. The original survey was for a line to run roughly parallel to the Bruxner Highway between Casino and Tenterfield. An alternate route was also put forward for the line to run between Casino and Tenterfield via Bonalbo. Both routes were eventually abandoned due to limited funding at the time. Although the cost of construction of this section would be relatively high per kilometre, it would still be far shorter than all the other 'western route' alternatives - less than half the distance compared to a standard gauge line via Wallangarra, Warwick and Toowoomba and about a quarter the distance between North Star and Brisbane.
7. Once construction of the Tenterfield to Casino line and upgrading of the Dumaresq to Tenterfield section of the New England line have been completed, it will effectively give southern and western destinations actually three (instead of two destinations as proposed by Ernst and Young) for freight to arrive and depart Queensland and Northern NSW. With the construction of a line linking Tenterfield to Casino the Sydney to Brisbane (coastal) line north from Casino would become the primary rail link into Queensland and would negate the need to construct a much longer and expensive standard gauge line in Queensland. The additional bonus would be that an additional rail link could be provided using the now closed Casino to Murwillumbah line to ship rail freight to Queensland from western and southern destinations. Murwillumbah could be reinstated as a railhead for this purpose as an interim until such time as an extension of this line runs to Coolangatta Airport (where it intended to operate to an intermodal terminal at the airport).

This would eventually provide direct rail freight access to South East Queensland and would not only link with local road freight to the Gold Coast, but would also link in with domestic and international airlines.

8. The cost of rail access fees needs to be considered prior to the construction of any rail lines in other states, particularly in Queensland. Queensland access fee rates are between 2.5 and 3 times that of NSW. Therefore an inland rail link may be actually more expensive to operate, and therefore will be more expensive for the customer once freight costs are passed on. Using the north coast line as the final link up to Queensland will give the customer the cheapest available costs in terms of access fee charges as this route is by far the shortest distance from the NSW/Qld border to Acacia Ridge and Fisherman's Island freight destinations.
9. Using the Murwillumbah line and transiting freight from rail to road at either Murwillumbah and or Coolangatta Airport will in fact be an even cheaper option than using the main north coast rail line as the Murwillumbah line is wholly within NSW even if Coolangatta Airport is eventually brought on line as only NSW access fee charges will apply.

Benefits Resulting From Tenterfield – Casino Rail Link

A number of benefits would result if the Tenterfield – Casino link was adopted. Some of these benefits would be:

- a. Significant cost savings in construction compared to other western route proposals;
- b. Substantial savings in construction times compared to all other western route proposals;
- c. An earlier start up of rail traffic along the new route as a result of construction time savings;
- d. Immediate benefits to the environment as a result of fewer trucks along the North - South corridor as a result of freight being railed instead of being transported by road;
- e. Reduced road carnage as a result of less truck accidents on roads and as a spin off, reductions in hospital and medical staff costs and time;
- f. Queensland and Northern NSW having more access points for freight to and from other destinations;
- g. Assisting the Murwillumbah line to be a viable rail line in its own right;
- h. Provide a boost to tourism in Northern NSW and the New England areas as a result of the new rail link between Tenterfield and Casino;

- i. Reduction in the transshipment of freight into and out of Acacia Ridge – Some Casino freight is railed from Sydney to Brisbane and road freighted back to Casino, wasting time and resources as well as clogging up Acacia Ridge with unnecessary traffic;
- j. Spreading the freight burden between three freight terminals (if Murwillumbah was established) instead of two (Acacia Ridge and Fishermen’s Island in Queensland) as proposed and therefore relieving the need to construct more, or expand existing, freight terminals for many years to come in this region;
- k. Casino could become a major transshipment location for NSW North Coast freight resulting in a more efficient and faster service for customers;
- l. Providing customers with a range of freight destination options in Queensland and in Northern NSW for freight delivery and departure;
- m. A new direct passenger corridor could also result for interstate and intrastate travellers. Passengers could travel directly to and from Victoria and Queensland using the new corridor. Better and faster connections for travellers to and from other states could also make passenger train travel an even more attractive proposition than at present. For example, someone travelling from Adelaide to the Gold Coast could catch a train to Parkes and connect with a service to Queensland, instead of travelling all the way to Sydney to connect with a Brisbane service. Many hours of travel time and cost could be saved. Similarly, many intrastate passengers, for example, those travelling from Dubbo to Wagga would then have a direct service and would negate the need to travel from Dubbo to Wagga via Sydney. This would save an extra days travel each way as well as the resultant fare savings.

Recommendations

Given an assessment of this North-South Rail Study the following recommendations are made

1. The inland rail corridor main routing to be Melbourne Victoria to Albury in NSW, Albury to Cootamundra, Temora, Parkes, Dubbo via Narromine, Binnaway, Werris Creek, Tamworth, Armidale to Tenterfield, Tenterfield to Casino – new link section, Casino to Acacia Ridge / Fishermen’s Island in Queensland;
2. Reopening and upgrading of the Casino to Murwillumbah line for freight and passengers to the Gold Coast. Extending the Murwillumbah line to Coolangatta Airport to link with Queensland Rail services for passengers;
3. Supplementary lines to be available in the event of derailments or accidents or adverse weather conditions such as flooding or fires etc.

Supplementary lines can also be valuable in circumstances where the main routes could be running at full capacity or where track work is needed on the main lines which could see sections out of action for several weeks. Supplementary routes can also be traffic generators in their own right and feed into the main rail corridor.

Supplementary routes recommended to be available are:

- Mangalore (Vic) to Junee (NSW) via Tocumwal
 - Harden to Blayney
 - Blayney to Wallerawang to Merrygoen
 - Blayney to Dubbo via Orange
 - Gulgong to Muswellbrook to Werris Creek
 - Muswellbrook to Maitland.
4. The North-South Rail Corridor be utilised for passenger services to cater for local, intra and interstate destinations.
 5. Tourism along the corridor selected be promoted and developed due to new rail services and connections to other rail destinations
 6. Feeder freight and passenger services to be developed along intersecting rail lines. E.g., Gold Coast to Casino, Coonabarabran and Mudgee would benefit from a connecting passenger service to meet at Merrygoen and or Binnaway to a new inland interstate passenger service. Similarly passengers and freight to Narrabri and Moree, Narromine to Nyngan and Cobar etc.
 7. Upgrade New England rail line corridor to grade 1 standards for freight. Track and signalling to be upgraded.
 8. Construct new 100 kilometre rail line link from Casino to Tenterfield as opposed to a 300 – 400 kilometre link from Moree to Brisbane via Toowoomba in Queensland.
 9. Dual gauge, standard and broad gauge line, from Melbourne to Albury instead of adding or extending more crossing loops along the standard gauge line in this section. This effectively would create an up and down line for both gauges in Victoria.
 10. Construct a second line between Albury and Junee. This would complete double track between Sydney and Melbourne and significantly speed up freight and passenger services between these cities by reducing waiting times at crossing loops. Capacity would also significantly increase as a result of double track coupled with automatic light signalling
 11. Recommend the above corridor also for the reason of the existing infrastructure to service locomotives at depots such as Junee, Parkes, Dubbo, Werris Creek and Casino as well as Melbourne and Brisbane. These destinations are also suitable for crew changeovers whereas new lines need to have sufficient infrastructure built into them which also adds to cost. Communication along these corridors is also available in the main, thereby also keeping development costs down.

12. Recommend that taxpayers receive the maximum benefit for dollars spent on the rail corridor, which, although predominantly for freight, could be a stimulus to people travelling throughout the eastern states and even further by rail, attracting tourism to regional areas and moving the nations produce.
13. Removing the bottlenecks along the recommended corridor and improving and upgrading the existing infrastructure along the corridor. This may include adding in triangles at places like Blayney so freight can be moved directly north to south and vice versa without needing to be shunted around. Reduplication of tracks on the western line and extension of duplicated tracks west of Bathurst may be required to Parkes.

For further information or clarification of this submission, please contact:

Phil Mackenzie
President, Tweed Rail Society
515 Back Forest Road
Berry NSW 2535
Tel: 02 4464 2665
Mob: 0403 840 080
Email: tweedrail@shoalhaven.net.au