NTCA Submission to The Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads

The National Timber Councils Association (NTCA) is an incorporated local government association representing the interests of member municipal regional and rural councils in relation to forestry on both public and private land. The Association’s primary function is to provide a forum for local government to address the management of forests and forest industries and their impact on local communities.
The National Timber Councils Association (NTCA) would like to thank the Victorian State Government for supporting a process that enables organisations such as ours to be heard at the state level. Our Association welcomes the submission process and is glad to make a submission.

The NTCA represents councils who host the forest industry from four states, New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria, with informal connections to councils across the remainder of Australia.

One of our key strategic directions is Freight Infrastructure Funding; we see the need at all levels of government that appropriate funding is allocated to the management of the road network to ensure the efficient movement of freight, which supports the economic prosperity and liveability of regional and rural communities.

We acknowledge that VicRoads is a Victorian Statutory Authority, with one of its core services being the planning, developing and managing arterial road networks in Victoria. It is our understanding that there is approximately 19000 km of country arterial roads.

In response to the terms of reference we would like to make the following comments:

The effectiveness of VicRoads managing country roads is directly affected by the funding it receives from the State Government, and in our opinion this funding has been inadequate. The failure to provide adequate funding only results in roads not being maintained to the appropriate level, increasing backlog of works and increasing rehabilitation works.

According to the VicRoads Annual Report 2016-17, "The Chief Executive is supported by the Executive Leadership Team, which is responsible for setting and adapting VicRoads’ vision, strategic objectives and priorities to meet the minister’s expectations of the road system." If the Government’s priorities and funding do not focus on country roads then the statutory authority is also restricted in its effectiveness.

Infrastructure Victoria in their 30 year Infrastructure Strategy, stated in regard to regional roads, that there is a need for state government to provide additional support for maintaining and upgrading state and local roads in regional areas beyond currently committed funding. Therefore one could state that the funding model may not be the problem regarding the lack of effectiveness for country Victoria but rather the inadequate level of funds.

When a community member has a road issue, they are not interested who owns the road but just want the issue to be fixed. Therefore, when looking at country roads and road networks the funding should be for both local and state roads. Since the country roads and bridges program lapsed, the replacement funding program, while it is a $1 billion fund only focuses on state assets and not on local roads which has only placed further pressures on local government to deliver and maintain infrastructure. Regional and rural councils’ road networks combined are greater than VicRoads and metropolitan councils, that are not only critical to local communities but also the movement of freight. Infrastructure Victoria has stated that local roads are particularly important for the first and last mile freight. An example of this can be seen in the Victorian Timber Industry which is a substantial contributor to the state’s regional and overall economies. The Timber Impact Roads Evaluation Study (TIRES) identifies the local road infrastructure, focusing on the first mile: the local roads utilised at the beginning of each timber run, currently unmaintained by state funding. The study uses the Timber Index (TI) formula as created by VicRoads, to rank each road maintenance project by regional priority. In the 2016-2020 TIRES Report, a total of 225 roads listed for infrastructure maintenance across the state which will carry an estimated 14.7 million tonnes over
the next five years. The total cost of works required on the roads is in excess of $70 million during 2016 – 2020, vital in meeting the needs of the Victorian forest industry. The Victorian timber industry is a substantial contributor to the state’s economy especially in regional areas. The industry directly employs approximately 237000 people in businesses that generate net expenditure within the state of between $1.2 and $1.6 billion dollars annually with the total output from the Victorian forest and forest products industry estimated at $6.4 billion per year.  

If “VicRoads’ purpose is to support economic prosperity and liveability by shaping the development and use of Victoria’s road system as an integral part of the overall transport system”*4, as stated in VicRoads Annual Report 2016-17, then it is crucial that a funding program be made available through VicRoads to fund the roads in the TlRES 2016-2020 report, which are after all country roads.

The inquiry needs to consider that well maintained road network helps the freight network which assists in the prosperity of our state.

In our experience and talking to various stakeholders, VicRoads regional offices tend to develop relationships with key stakeholders and hold regular meetings to consult, thus helping inform future works. We are also aware of consultations with communities and that has resulted in the VicRoads document: Country Roads, your insights, our actions. Communities demand transparency in decision making, so any processes that are developed to assist in understanding how works need to be prioritised would be welcome.

In regard to dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body, NTCA believes that this is unnecessary as it will be a waste of time and money. It will only create another statutory authority, which the costs and time to set up will remove possible funds that could be directed to country roads and create further delays to projects.

While we appreciate the opportunity to comment to this inquiry we are somewhat perplexed on why there is an inquiry into an organisation when their effectiveness is determined by their funding and state government priorities and why the VAGO report on Maintenance of State Controlled Roadways (2017) wasn’t used to improve processes and funding instead?

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References:

2. Infrastructure Victoria: Victoria’s 30-Year Infrastructure Strategy, Dec 2016, pg 160