The Executive Officer  
Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To Whom It May Concern,

I write to you today to put forward my submissions for the Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of country roads by Vicroads. As a full time crop agronomist and casual truck driver based in Rupanyup I travel approximately 80-90 thousand kilometres per year, mostly on A, B and C roads that fall under the jurisdiction of Vicroads management. The regions in which I travel mostly include the Wimmera, Mallee and Western District or in other words a fair section of Western Victoria. In my 10 years in these two roles it would be fair to say that the management of the roads in these regions of Western Victoria are sub-standard at best and getting worse. Some of the roads which I refer to include but are not limited too are the Borung Highway, Henty Highway, Stawell-Warracknabeal Rd, Sunraysia Highway, Western Highway and Wimmera Highway. In recent years a combination of two major flooding events has completely exacerbated the poor state of our roads in this region however the poor standard these important arterial roads are in can only be partially attributed to recent flooding. A lack of funding from both sides of the political spectrum and an indifference in opinion from Vicroads themselves in where they spend their limited amount of funding is still the greatest cause for the slow but continual degradation of the roads in this area. There are countless examples of vehicles, both cars and trucks, that have significantly damaged wheels and suspension components whilst in some circumstances they have completely lost control rolling or running off the road due to the poor nature of the road surface but seemingly little is done to rectify the issue.

Over the last 15 months myself and several locals from the Rupanyup area have lobbied Vicroads about the dangerous state of the Stawell - Warracknabeal Rd south of Rupanyup. To say the least the response from Vicroads in trying to fix this stretch of road was completely disappointing. Their idea of maintenance over the last 10 years has been to patch up and seal partial areas of the shoulder when potholes or cracks begin to appear in the pavement. With the wet spring of 2016 and wet winter last year, these ‘patch’ up repairs in the short term caused issues whenever it rained by preventing standing water to drain from the road surface by sitting in the middle of the road. In the longer term this has caused seepage which ultimately formed large cracks and holes in the road that were nearly undriveable in all but a truck or 4WD (see attached photos). After many months of chipped windscreens, damaged suspension / driveline components and plenty of near misses to those who did not know where the surface imperfections lay, Vicroads finally responded by temporarily reducing the speed limit on the worst sections in September last year. It took a further two months for any repair work to take place, right when the traffic volumes increased significantly with the beginning of harvest. Over the next four to five weeks works took place to rectify the worst of the potholes, while other cracks in the road were filled with a patching of stone and bitumen. On the poorest sections of road that were completely ripped up, reformed and re-sheeted/sealed it only took a matter before days before large potholes broke out on the shoulders and the section needed re-repairing again after all that time, effort and money. The next significant rainfall event we receive will most likely see parts of these ‘repairs’ ending up back where they were in the first place. This is just one of a myriad of roads in Western Victoria that receives these sorts of sub-standard repairs only to need follow up work. A well-documented large section of the new Western Freeway between Ballarat and Beaufort has experienced a similar sort of issue which brings into question the road building techniques of either the contractors undertaking the work or the specification that Vicroads’ engineers are requesting for these types of works. I would question why these roads aren’t being correctly built or fixed the first time and perhaps the contractors undertaking this work should be held to account.

Another issue that is irking many country road users in our area is the wasteful spend by the TAC and Vicroads on the installation of ‘safer’ or wire rope barriers with little to no community consultation other than some ads on TV or a recent wasteful full page ad ran in newspapers across Victoria. Over
the next five years it has been estimated that $800 million to $1 billion will be spent erecting these barriers, money that should be spent first and foremost rectifying the issues with our crumbling rural road network. There seems to be little thought given into where these barriers are placed and as they stretch for kilometres they now cause many other unintended consequences for users of rural roads as listed in the following points.

a) The majority of these barriers are placed so closely to the edge of the shoulder (particularly along the Western Highway in which I frequent) that it is impossible for a car let alone a heavy vehicle to pull off the road safely in the event of a breakdown or tyre blowout. The vehicles that have the misfortune of stopping in these areas literally hang out over the adjoining lane. This also makes it dangerous for emergency service workers such as police to intercept and pull over vehicles where there are barriers.

b) Motorcyclists who are already well over represented in road trauma statistics stand little to zero chance of survival due to the risk of striking the uprights that hold the steel cable for the barriers should they come off their motorcycle.

c) The barriers are not sufficient enough to prevent a heavy vehicle from breaking through.

d) There are no provisions for farmers or primary producers to safely transport slow moving and oversized machinery and equipment on highways without impeding two lanes of traffic. Previously before the installation of barriers it was possible for farmers undertaking this type of activity to move over to the left past the shoulder to let traffic in both lanes through.

e) Traffic is now funnelled between the barriers and in the event of an emergency where evasive action may be required (ie: fallen tree branches, animals wandering on the road, debris falling from another vehicle, vehicles veering into the opposite lane) there is now no other option but to brake in time or completely hit the object.

f) Firefighters now cannot access adjacent paddocks where wire rope barriers are installed because the gaps between each barrier are infrequent. It is common practice for firefighters to cut fences in rural areas in times of an emergency for quick access to the scene, however it is highly dangerous and completely unfeasible to cut wire rope barriers that are highly tensioned.

g) Many wire rope barriers that are struck by a vehicle aren’t repaired rendering them useless anyway and in certain circumstances has been known to cause a more serious collision.

h) Many of the new barriers along some of our freeways and highways are being placed in areas where there are no objects off to the side of the road such as trees or poles to hit.

I believe that this almost fanatical focus on wire rope barriers needs to be investigated thoroughly before more money is wasted. Ideally a redirection of these funds to fix the poorest roads under Vicroads management would be the best outcome for rural road users in Victoria. That is not to lessen the good work that has been done by the TAC over many years. Road trauma is a significant issue in rural Victoria and more needs to be done to reduce the road toll, but many people in the bush are disenchanted and feel we are not being listened to when it comes to fixing the real issues we see on a daily basis. I am all for making roads safer, but when you have large potholes or sections of bitumen missing that forces a vehicle onto the other side of the road should this not be a priority before we look at active safety measures like wire rope barriers?

Should the enquiry wish to contact me on any of the points raised please do not hesitate to contact me and thank you for the time spent to consider my submission.

Best regards,

Brad Jackson
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