Safety on Victorian Country Roads and VicRoads

Dear Committee,

I write concerning the state of Gippsland roads in particular and Victorian country roads in general and the safety of those roads. In the most part, the roads I am referring to are the responsibility of VicRoads.

I travel quite widely through Victoria and beyond for my work and recreation. There is little doubt that the surface quality of Gippsland Roads are amongst the worst in the state although South West Victoria is also very bad.

VicRoads safety initiatives are apparent with endless dollars being spent on steel wire barriers at a time when road surface conditions are very often poor and continuing to deteriorate. This, combined with the poor and inconsistent quality of the patching that is carried out, results in an increasingly unsafe surface. Sections of road are left far too long before action is taken resulting in a smooth shiny surface that becomes very slippery in the wet. Take for example the section of the M1 Princes Highway through Moe.

Add to this the patching practice where the area of the patch is clearly not big enough to replace the damaged surface and subsurface of the road. This is presumably some sort of cost saving measure, however it appears to add cost because the areas around the patch often deteriorate seriously within only a few months with degraded rough areas and indeed sharp high ridges thrown up in the longitudinal mid road edge of the patch (Figure 1). Some of these get so high that they are almost certainly hit by vehicle chassis structures as judged by scrapes left on the road surface. There are then patches placed on patches placed on patches, until some sections of the road look like a patchwork quilt and are very uneven and bumpy. (It is interesting to note that some local Councils and Shires do a better job of patching roads than Vicroads!)
Figure 1. Two examples of totally inappropriate marking of dangerous ridge sections of road immediately adjacent to poorly patching.

The condition of road surfaces is such that there are endless holes and ridges and cracked up areas such that drivers including myself find the need to swerve to miss something we think might damage our vehicle. A case in point, I have damaged, to the point of needing expensive repairs, 3 wheel rims, on 3 separate pothole hits. And yes they were VicRoads roads!

I recently had a driver in front of me on the Goulburn Valley Highway (admittedly this isn’t a Gippsland Road, but for a new Highway it is also deteriorating very rapidly in parts) slow very quickly in response to a warning sign for “Road Hazard Ahead” and an obvious degraded section of road. There was very nearly a rear end collision because at the stage I couldn’t see the road or the damaged section, and yes I was watching and yes I was travelling within the speed limit and at a safe distance.

The mismatch of the money spent on wire barriers on the one hand and road repairs and road resurfacing on the other in terms of the benefits to the safety of drivers is very doubtful. And yes I am well aware of the repeatedly stated defence that these two activities come from separate budgets. But that argument just doesn’t stack up in the “pub test” that has repeatedly been mentioned by senior Australian politicians over the last few years. Many people are commenting on the inappropriate expenditure and placing of the wire barriers. The building of these is also continually holding up travel for Gippslanders.
It is also interesting to note that in the implementation of the wire barrier project VicRoads has poorly managed this. While signs and electronic prompts in modern cars encourage us to rest regularly, the simple act of now changing drivers, which is perhaps one of the best ways to rest weary drivers is now no longer safe. To allow the passenger to get out, the car is now positioned such that on occasions the driver’s door if fully open extends onto the left carriageway and the driver and new driver must pass extremely close to the left carriageway. There are no stop areas or change over areas. The wire barriers are simply too close to allow this changeover to occur safely. How could a professional organisation get this so wrong? In addressing one hazard, they have in fact introduced another. One has to wonder whether a HAZOP (hazard and operability assessment common to all major capital projects) was in fact done on the barrier design!

It is clear VicRoads is aware of the problem of poor surface conditions since they are continually erecting “Road Hazard Ahead” signs and dropping speed limits at an alarming rate. This is not an answer. It can only at best be a short term measure. Some of these signs have been in place for many months. The increasing numbers of electronic “Drive Safely” signs on trailers on roadsides are an affront to drivers on country roads. How can we drive safely when the road surfaces do not meet even basic safety standards?

The placement of the hazard signs is also often extremely poor leaving the driver guessing where the “hazard” is. Sometimes there appears to be none and at others the hazard is serious and does indeed require rapid slowing or swerving to dodge it. Unfortunately on occasions the notification is so close that the only option left is to “hit” the hazard and hope for the best. A recent case in point was coming back from Mt Gambier in South West Victoria where the road was so bad that even in a 4WD vehicle we hit extremely hard and wondered about possible damage to wheels.

At the very least, VicRoads must be required to manage their available funds to improve the surfaces and road condition of Gippsland Roads and Victorian roads in general. If this means less money for wire barriers, so be it. There is no point having 5 star rated highways, or whatever the objective is, if the highway, and other regional roads, are unsafe and unpleasant to drive on.

So in summary relating to the stated terms of reference

1. **The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads**

   VicRoads has demonstrated for many years, very poor management of country roads to the extent that it is now increasingly dangerous to drive on these roads. Simply putting up Road Hazard signs is not a satisfactory management strategy.

2. **The existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria**

   There appears to be a problem with funding when large amounts of money are spent on new safety barriers but the road surfaces themselves are left to deteriorate significantly. It would appear that there needs to be a significant increase in funds for road surface management of country roads.

3. **The lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input into prioritising which roads are in dire need of repair**

   On occasions I have tried to notify VicRoads of particularly dangerous potholes. The persons at the call centre simply wouldn’t accept descriptions such as “the roundabout on the Inverloch Morwell Rd but wanted the A, B or C number combination for the road. No one refers to roads by those. Country people tend to use the names such as the Inverloch
Morwell Road. VicRoads certainly does not appear to have developed a satisfactory system of consulting and acting upon information from country residents.

4. The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.

There may indeed be merit in setting up two separate entities, one with country road responsibilities and able to respond more quickly and appropriately to deteriorating road surfaces and other safety issues in country Victoria.

In my opinion, without doubt, VicRoads has mismanaged their responsibility to country travellers.

Yours Sincerely

Peter Mosse