



CLARENCE ENVIRONMENT CENTRE

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Date: 1st September 2012

Bob Higgins
Pacific Highway Upgrade
Roads and Maritime Services

Dear Mr Higgins

Statement on Pacific Highway Upgrade – Wells Crossing to Iluka Road

I had prepared a statement for last night's seminar on the impacts of the proposed upgrade on the Endangered Coastal Emu Population. Unfortunately, I must have missed something, and was unaware that there was a time limit, so was taken by surprise when, with several hands raised around the room, Stan announced that we had time for two more questions. As a result, I am taking this opportunity to forward you this statement on behalf of the Clarence Environment Centre (CEC).

Community consultation

Before that however, I would like to make a comment supporting Greg Clancy's assertion last night that consultation with environment groups (the Environmental Working Group, I think it was called) was abruptly severed some seven years ago, and promised site inspections and meetings never happened.

I would also refute your claim of comprehensive consultation over the alternate routes review, which took place at the Angourie Rainforest Resort over a two day period. In fact the peak environment group, the North Coast Environment Council, was specifically denied representation at that workshop. I know, because I was their nominated representative.

When work on the Glenugie section was brought forward as part of the Federal Government's stimulus package, I rang the project office in Grafton and asked that the CEC be included on any environmental working group. I was given an assurance that full consultation would be undertaken, but again that never happened, and as far as I can determine, not a single consultation meeting was ever held with environment groups. In short, the consultation process was abysmal.

Statement

The North Coast Environment Council, the CEC, and other local groups, have always claimed that the 'motorway' concept for the Clarence Valley is 'over-kill'. The section of highway between Coffs Harbour and Ballina undeniably carries the lowest traffic volumes of anywhere along Highway One from Warrnambool in Victoria to Gympie in Queensland, so why a separate motorway?

We have always asserted that a simple addition of two more lanes to the current highway is all that is needed, and would save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. There would need to be minor straightening, and diversions around South Grafton and the hamlets Ulmarra and Tyndale. There are already two sections of divided road, at Shark Creek and Cowper, that are perfectly adequate for the amount of traffic using the highway for the foreseeable future, and provide the safety levels demanded by the public.

We also assert that if that course of action had been pursued, the section of highway upgrade from Wells Crossing to at least Maclean could now have been completed at a minimal cost. We acknowledge that that route has flooding problems, something that is likely to worsen over time with predicted sea level rise. However, I point out that the preferred route is only flood-proofed to a one in twenty year flood level, when traffic would need to transfer to the New England Highway for 2 or 3 days, as is already the case; hardly an insurmountable problem.

To support our argument even further, the RTA has identified that 70% of Pacific Highway road-users in the Clarence Valley are local commuters that will continue to use the existing highway, and that the existing road will also be upgraded to 4 lane status for safety reasons, bypassing Ulmarra in the process. So where is the logic for building a totally separate, highly environmentally damaging motorway, to cater for just 30% of the total traffic volume?

We believe the current bypass plan will not only be a disaster for the Coastal Emu and the scores of other threatened species that will be directly impacted, but will also be disastrous for Grafton, with the longest off-ramps in the country (12km from the south, and a further 30km to the north).

Finally, we also believe it is not too late to reassess the entire Clarence Valley proposal.

In conclusion

Following last night's meeting, it was clear that little has changed in the last 8 years, with the RMS's intransigence remaining the one constant. The over-riding message was "we know best", our consultation will consist of informing the community what we have decided to do, and if the community becomes too insistent, then we simply cut the consultation process.

I heard the argument last night that a 7km extra length of highway would be unacceptable because of the extra travel time and the carbon emissions this would cause. If the RMS was halfway serious about travel times and carbon emissions, there would be a plan to take the straight line route to Brisbane, bypassing Grafton to Casino, Kyogle, Baudesert to Brisbane.

That concept would avoid sensitive coastal floodplains, expensive to cross tidal estuaries, high value real estate, and the traffic nightmare of the Gold Coast. That option was also considered in about 2006, but only after the obvious advantages of the shorter route were highlighted.

The charade, which is the only way to describe that review, was a joke. It included an option of taking a route to Casino then cutting all the way back to Byron Bay, while one argument put forward against routing the highway through Kyogle and Baudesert was that it would provide such an efficient transport corridor that it would unfairly compete with rail freight.

I think that just about says it all.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary
Clarence Environment Centre

Copies to: Minister for Roads The Hon Duncan Gay
Richie Williamson, Clarence Valley Mayor and Pacific Highway Taskforce Chair
Dr. Greg Clancy – Birdlife Australia - for distribution.
Jenna Carney – Editor of Daily Examiner