



10 March 2023

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and
Transport
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee

Re: Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural and remote road network

Overview

Located 250km from Melbourne in the north east of Victoria, The Rural City of Wangaratta covers 3,645 square kilometres with a population of 30,000 residents. The main centre is Wangaratta which sits at the converge of the Ovens and King River and the One, Three and Fifteen Mile Creeks. Along with several other minor waterways. Wangaratta is particularly susceptible to flooding having had two major flooding events in the past 5 years both causing several millions of dollars' worth of damage to Council and community infrastructure.

Context

Council maintains 2,000km of road network both sealed and unsealed, 154 bridge structures, over 5000 culverts, 30km of levees and thousands of kilometres of open and piped drains.

Council officers believe that the current design standards (Infrastructure Design Manual) are adequate for current conditions and will withstand some of the future significant impact of events caused by climate change.

Challenges

Given the current rate capping environment, extreme inflation (particularly in materials) and a lack of competent contractors / experienced staff, maintaining road, bridge and drainage infrastructure to the current standards is almost impossible. With significant regional growth since COVID and more extreme weather events, the shortfall in funding for road maintenance is only exacerbated. Increased construction standards would only increase the shortfall for Council without any real benefit.

During disaster events Council ability to assist the community is often hampered with disaster response being prioritised over standard services as the workforce is not able to flex to cater for the additional requirements.

Funding arrangements are far too complex and slow to become available on the ground. Some of the issues are noted below.

Betterment is problematic and further impacts our current budget situation. Often requiring funding to be “brought forward” from future years budgets compounding future budget issues.

Example One:

Bridge washed out around the back of one abutment. The wooden bridge needed to be replaced in full as an abutment could not be replaced without replacing the entire bridge. Funding only covered the section of road that had washed away and the single abutment back to the standard of the current wooden bridge. Council had to fund the upgrade to current standards, the replacement of the western end abutment and road upgrades. Two thirds of the repair costs fell to Council for works that weren't budgeted until 2027.

Example Two:

Large wooden bridge completely washed away by flood; the bridge had a 20t load limit. Council was required to design with a 20t limit and one for current day standard. Council paid the difference between the two cost estimates even though the bridge was totally destroyed in the event. The difference paid by Council was approximately \$350,000.

The claims process is difficult and requires significant input from Council staff further reducing their ability to respond directly to issues relating to the event. Having only one assessor in the Northeast reduces the capacity to complete estimates and get claims processed in a timely fashion.

Example Three:

In the 2018 Flood event Council had three staff working on the flood claim (\$3,000,000) for 3 months just to submit the claims

Example Four:

Following recent flood events which ended in December 2022 we are still completing claims and have only recently been approved to complete the first works claim. This has meant some of our community have been without suitable access to houses and farming land for many Months.

Opportunities:

If councils were funded at an appropriate level to maintain the existing road networks the current standards would be consistently adequate. The damage caused to roads and bridges is mainly due to the inability to complete required proactive maintenance works, including cleaning drains, minor bridge repair, sealing and re-sheeting roads etc.

Until there is financial means and resource capacity, the resilience of the network will be held-to-ransom.

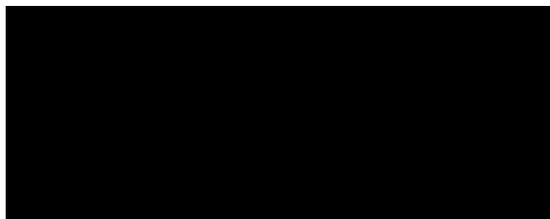
Greater funding for proactive maintenance of assets will not only reduce the impacts of climate change in these assets it will also reduce the claim through the federal and state disaster funding arrangements.

Removal of restrictions on “betterment” would allow Councils to continue to maintain existing infrastructure without impacting current year budgets.

The claims process is automated through an online portal. The entire process is very time-consuming and though we can charge if we use external consultants, they don't know the local area or communities as well as our staff.

Thank you for considering our submission and we would be happy to provide further information to support this.

Yours sincerely,



Brendan McGrath
Chief Executive Officer