

8 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,

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and
Transport - Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional,
rural, and remote road network.**

Towong Shire Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network*. Our intent is to provide the Committee with localised and lived experience examples of the impact of extreme weather events and provide practical recommendations that will support Council to build and maintain a more resilient road network.

We would also like to take the opportunity to formally acknowledge and support the submission made by Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV). This submission raises a number of key issues and challenges faced by the local government sector including Towong Shire Council. In particular - the ongoing challenge of financial sustainability faced by councils, infrastructure maintenance and delivery challenges and asset assessment capability in the aftermath of extreme weather events.

Towong Shire Council is a small rural council located in far north eastern Victoria. The Shire covers an area of 6,675 square kilometres and with a population of 6,223 (ABS, Census 2021) it makes us one of the most sparsely populated local government areas in the State. Despite this small rate payer base and limited opportunity to raise income through other streams we manage and maintain 1,183 km of road, 91 bridges and 75 major culverts. Despite the majority of this network not being built to support heavy vehicle movement, it acts as a key transport link for the agriculture and forestry industry. The suboptimal condition of some roads within the network has in part, resulted in higher transport costs, delays in getting product to market and adverse economic consequences for industry.

Over the last three years the communities of Towong Shire have borne the brunt of some of the most extreme and significant natural disasters and weather events. At the beginning of 2020 more than 225,000 hectares of land in the Upper Murray was impacted by bushfire; in early 2022 the communities of Bellbridge, Bethanga and surrounding areas were hit by storms resulting in damage to 29 roads, 3 bridges and 16 culverts. Later that year communities in the Mitta Valley, Tallangatta Valley and surrounding areas were hit by flooding resulting in damage to 64 roads, 5 bridges and a significant number of culverts. The impact of these events on the state managed arterial roads that serve our communities can't be overlooked. Nearly six months on, there are multiple instances of 100km zones remaining at 40km as a safety measure. The expectation is, that these will remain in place for an extended period as there is insufficient funding to complete repairs.

Recent extreme weather events have led to a rapid deterioration of our infrastructure. While the impact and severity of recent events plays a role, it is also a result of agreed practices and standards not evolving to consider changes in climatic conditions and traffic volume. The collective impact of storms on our infrastructure has resulted in the lodging of almost \$4.5 million in claims under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement (DRFA). In addition, Council has allocated an additional \$1million dollars to this year's annual maintenance and patching program simply to keep a baseline standard. As a comparison, historically our average annual patching program has been \$500,000.

While the opportunity to recoup some costs incurred as a result of these natural disasters is both welcome and necessary there are opportunities for the Commonwealth to use this mechanism to improve the resilience of our road networks. Currently, the DRFA guidelines not only limit, but outright preclude Council's from reconstructing infrastructure with a lens on the future. *Recommendation: DRFA funding to be tied to a minimum standard of reconstruction that considers likely future severe weather events and allows Council to incrementally enhance the resilience of their road network.*

As a Council we have adopted a range of cost saving measures as a means of balancing the needs of our community with a small rate payer base, rate capping and limited opportunities to raise additional revenue. We have rationalised asset management inspection schedules based on usage data and recognise that with additional resources we would be able to deliver increased drainage maintenance works. However, the reality is that for a small rural Council with a significant road network there are few ways to attract funding for ongoing maintenance and even less for proactive, future proofing measures.

Existing funding opportunities place Council against Council in the development of a business case where traffic volume is a heavily favoured selection criterion. In communities with low populations the numbers simply don't compete despite link roads acting as a corridor for the agriculture industry. *Recommendation: Consideration to be given to the establishment of funding streams that address disparity, encourages future proofing and do not force Council's to wait for the disaster before being able to access funding.*

Moving beyond the immediacy of funding requirements for maintenance and reconstruction the move to standards that consider future severe weather events will likely expose another vulnerability for Councils – a skill and knowledge gap. Currently, there is a gap between the knowledge and skill set available within Council's and what will be required to meet new and evolving standards that consider climate data. Regardless of want or will, the ability of Council to adopt new practices will be largely reliant on the support of government and industry to fill this knowledge gap. *Recommendation: Coordinated public private investment to support the upskilling and sharing of innovative road maintenance technologies across the local government sector.*

In addition to the technical elements of road maintenance and management consideration also needs to be given to the management of storm water and its impact on road infrastructure. The existing capacity of our urban stormwater systems are not designed to absorb the frequency and intensity of recent and predictive rain events. This issue becomes magnified in cases of new developments where, as a result of being on the periphery of townships the existing network capacity is inadequate to support increased pipe and pit sizes. In the absence of the full network being upgraded to provide adequate storage there is a real risk that the intensity of a rain event will overpower the system and

result in both property and road infrastructure damage even with the overland flow paths established. *Recommendation: Full network upgrade and conditions of subdivision to consider the upsizing of stormwater drainage infrastructure.*

We thank you for the opportunity provide a local context and recommendations to this Inquiry and should there be an additional public hearing would welcome the opportunity to appear.

Should you require any additional information please contact Georgina Curtis, Coordinator Advocacy

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Your faithfully

[REDACTED]

Cr Andrew Whitehead

Mayor

Towong Shire Council