

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Inland Rail Project

We are the owners of a property which is within the 2 km wide corridor of the Melbourne to Brisbane Inland Rail route, in the section between the Wellcamp Airport and Gowrie Junction, west of Toowoomba. We have lived here for 25 years and never envisaged that a major rail line would dissect our farm and run within 100 metres of our house. The announcement of the final alignment within the corridor also shows that the line runs through the middle of the prime irrigation land upon which we rely to produce feed for our stud cattle.

Route Planning and Selection

Since the Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development, the Hon Darren Chester MP, made the announcement on 21 September 2017 about the alignment of the route, we have been able to access numerous documents and pieces of correspondence relating to the lengthy and torturous process that has been undertaken to determine the final route. This material has been gathered through attendance at PRG “drop-in” meetings in February 2017, Community Information sessions in 2017, 2018 and 2019, Community Consultative Committee meetings in 2018 and 2019 and from DIRD and ARTC documents and correspondence, from FOI requests and through personal research.

Our concern is with the lack of clarity and transparency in the process used to establish the preferred route and the resolute refusal to acknowledge obvious problems with the preferred route and to consider any alterations to the alignment. We are also concerned with the actual or perceived bias in deciding to take the route past the Wellcamp Airport.

From a local resident's perspective it is clear that considerable attention has been given to “big business” interests (eg Wellcamp Airport), with no input sought or considered from the affected community during the initial stages of the alignment determination. Documents obtained through Freedom of Information, reveal that correspondence from John Wagner (whose company owns Wellcamp Airport) to DIRD staff in late July 2016 indicates he provided a map showing where he wanted the line to be positioned in relation to the airport and that alignment was accepted following some discussion.

Communication we have had with DIRD staff has included statements such as “with respect to the Yelarbon to Gowrie section of Inland Rail, local Federal, State and Council representatives agreed to the four corridors that were selected to be independently reviewed during 2017.” Once again, no consultation with potentially affected landowners was conducted in the initial stages of the selection of the four routes to be considered.

The Project Reference Group, established in late January 2017 provided scant detail and approximate and ill-defined lines on a map of the four alignment options which were under consideration at that time. It is a severe indictment on the transparency and openness of the PRG process to learn from an email dated 28 February 2017 that “In October 2016 an MCA was held which identified the alternative route via Pittsworth as preference”. Further, that “the Pittsworth preference remained internal to the study team” and “in hindsight those responsible for preparation of the initial 'four routes' maps should have been aware that the Pittsworth route was already a preference. Several of the team did not know that the initial study had progressed to the point of the Pittsworth route being preferred.” Therefore the material presented to land owners through correspondence from Bruce Wilson (Chair of the PRG) and at “drop-in” sessions during February and March 2017 was not only misleading, but in hindsight, pointless. It is obvious that any outcomes

from the PRG process should be considered with significant reservations and the whole exercise was seen as a “tick-the box” activity. This route recommendation from the PRG was used by the then Federal Minister, The Hon Darren Chester, to support his announcement in September 2017 of the preferred route via Wellcamp Airport.

Following the announcement of the final route, there have been numerous meetings with ARTC staff and local Federal MPs, as well as correspondence with DIRD staff pointing out the very significant problems that exist with the current route. The problems identified, specifically for the Brookstead to Gowrie section, are as follows –

- It is a greenfield site, so that the landowners along the whole alignment had never envisaged that a railway line would be built through or adjacent to their land.
- There are a large number of small to medium sized properties in this region so the number of properties affected is significant (about 250 properties directly impacted, and 700 within the corridor).
- No attempt has been made in the route selection process to avoid the more densely populated areas. In fact, a casual observation of the route could lead you to think that ARTC have intentionally taken the route through or very near communities such as Brookstead, Pittsworth and Southbrook. In places the route goes straight through houses with no apparent attempt to avoid them.
- Property values in this region, being in close proximity to Toowoomba, are high and therefore the losses in property value are very significant for the individuals and the whole community.
- Approximately 65 of the directly impacted properties are commercially viable farming enterprises which will have their operations curtailed or completely closed down.
- The route has many undulations and curves; with rises of 200 metres and falls of 115metres resulting in the requirement for considerable cut and fill to produce a suitable gradient for the speed and weight of the freight trains.
- One critical criterion for the operation of Inland Rail used by ARTC is the “24 hour Melbourne to Brisbane time limit” which must now be seriously questioned, given the unaccounted for number of gradients, bridges and rail-over-road crossings in this area alone.
- Due to the density of the population in the area there are a large number of rural roads and a number of minor highways on the route, all of which will require road/rail crossings, raising road safety concerns, disruption to traffic flow and sounding of train horns.
- Noise, vibration and unsightly visual amenity are very real concerns for residents.

None of these problems have been acknowledged or adequately addressed by ARTC or DIRD staff.

Viable Alternative Routes

Throughout the last 2 years many local residents have raised the issue of alternative routes for the Inland Rail with ARTC, DIRD, local politicians and the local council. Alternative routes that will eliminate or mitigate the significant problems outlined above are –

1. The route which was the original route that was investigated prior to 2016, and referred to as the **Base Case**. This route runs from the border through Inglewood to Millmerran and follows the existing rail line to Brookstead and then a greenfield site north to Mt Tyson and follows an existing rail line to south of Oakey and then another greenfield site across the Warrego Highway to meet the western rail line near Kingsthorpe. Considering the section

from Brookstead to Gowrie, this route has the following advantages compared to the current route –

- In the initial investigations the Base Case was cheaper than the Wellcamp route.
 - The Base Case route comprised approximately 50% of brownfield development, meaning that the land was already owned by the government and the affected residents were accustomed to having a rail line in their vicinity.
 - The properties along the Base Case route are much larger and fewer in number and therefore the cost and time involved in land acquisition would be significantly lower.
 - The land is much flatter, in particular the brownfield sections, so the work and cost involved in producing a flat and straight track would be significantly less as would the travel time.
 - The area is much less densely populated; therefore, there are many fewer roads to cross, consequently less traffic disruption and lower cost.
2. A route referred to as the **Forestry Route**. This runs north from Yelarbon through State Forest to Cecil Plains, then follows a brownfield route to east of Mt Tyson and north on another brownfield route to south of Oakey, then east to meet the western rail line just west of Kingthorpe. The major advantages of this route are –
- The lengthy section through the forest is land owned by the State Government.
 - 95% of the remainder of this route is brownfield and already designated as a rail corridor and consequently owned by the State government
 - The number of private landholders affected is significantly smaller than with the chosen route.
 - Due to the much sparser population density the amount of disruption to the community, road traffic and individuals' lifestyles would be much less.
 - The cost of this Forestry Route would be massively lower.

When questioned many times about these alternative routes, ARTC has flatly refused to consider or discuss the matter. This seems to be the way that ARTC dismisses and disregards any significant suggestions raised by concerned residents.

ARTC and the Community

The arrogant and inconsiderate attitude demonstrated by ARTC staff is symptomatic of the approach shown by DIRD personnel, Federal MPs including the Deputy Prime Minister (as Infrastructure minister), State MPs and local councillors. Repeated claims are made that “we are listening to residents’ concerns” but there is no acknowledgement that these concerns are being considered or addressed and rarely is any action taken. The over-riding attitude seems to be to push through the current proposal (including the route alignment) at any cost and without any consideration being given to the hundreds of severely affected landowners. It would appear that ARTC in particular are determined to “tick all the boxes” for community consultation, irrespective of any outcomes that would be acceptable to the local community. I have been a member of the Inner Downs Community Consultative Committee since its inception in December 2017 and have found that it is used as a means of informing the community of what ARTC are planning to do. However, when it comes to serious issues such as problems with the current route or discussion on alternative routes they are defensive and unwilling to engage in meaningful debate. Often the presentations given at CCC meetings by ARTC personnel or their sub-contractors are laborious and poorly presented, leaving committee members and observers with little useful information and more questions than answers. Thus people are becoming more frustrated and disgruntled with the way that ARTC deal with community consultation. Further, ARTC staff have no knowledge of farming operations, thus they

have little understanding of the severe impacts of the rail line carving up farms and ruining farmers' livelihoods and lifestyles.

Costings and Financial Viability

Many of the local residents of this region have expressed significant concerns about the financial viability of the whole Inland Rail project, and whether the questionable financial status of the project justifies the massive disruption to most of the communities along the route. The only "business case" for the project that has been readily available is the one which was released in 2015 and this document has been reviewed and criticised by financial commentators; most finding that the costs have been underestimated and the potential returns have not been validated. When questions about the business case come up at CCC or information meetings, ARTC will not discuss the matter and claim that details about costs and returns are "commercially sensitive" and therefore not available for public scrutiny. Thus it could be assumed that the costs to tax payers will be significantly higher and financial viability of the project even more questionable.

In relation to the Border to Gowrie section of the line, the current route (the Wellcamp route) was claimed to cost \$1.335bn and the Base Case route was \$1.233bn (over \$0.1bn cheaper), as stated in the 2015 Business Case. However, the cost of \$1.335bn for the Wellcamp option now appears to be significantly underestimated, as major construction items such as bridges and culverts over the Condamine floodplain, bridges and culverts over the McIntyre floodplain, bridges over Westbrook and Dry Creeks and many rail-over-road bridges have not been accounted for. The 2015 Business Case specifies that an amount of \$21m has been allocated for property acquisition in Queensland, which would be patently inadequate to cover the more than 250 properties affected in the Border to Gowrie section alone. These are just some obvious examples of under-costing and much more detailed analysis needs to be done by expert financial analysts and the results made public. We are aware that this issue has been the subject of a number of Senate Estimates committee discussions and would encourage more investigation be done in this area.

Conclusion

Whilst our submission has focussed on the section from Brookstead to Gowrie, we are aware that there are numerous issues in other areas, especially similar problems in the greenfield sites in Queensland and New South Wales. Also, despite the government's claims, the rail line does not connect with the ports of Melbourne and Brisbane, which has the potential to make the whole project a "white elephant."

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. We trust that your Committee will put the Commonwealth Government and the ARTC under scrutiny for their handling of the project to date. They must be held accountable for the planning and design of the chosen route, expenditure and potential cost blow-out and the way they have treated affected people with disdain.

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