

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia

Inquiry into Preparing for Emerging Industries across Northern Australia

Submitted by: Outback Highway Development Council Inc. (OHDC)

Infrastructure Project: The Outback Way

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Executive Summary

The Outback Highway Development Council Inc. (OHDC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia's Inquiry into Preparing for Emerging Industries across Northern Australia.

The Outback Way is a nationally significant east–west corridor spanning approximately 2,720 kilometres from Laverton (Western Australia) to Winton (Queensland), via the Northern Territory. When fully sealed, it will be Australia's third transcontinental highway and a critical piece of nation-building infrastructure.

This submission contends that sealed transport corridors must be recognised as **foundational enablers** of emerging industries in Northern Australia. Reliable, all-weather road infrastructure is essential to reducing the cost of remoteness, improving productivity, enabling private sector investment and supporting workforce mobility across remote regions.

The Outback Way underpins a range of emerging and priority industries, including critical minerals and mining supply chains, renewable energy generation and transmission, defence logistics, digital and satellite-enabled services, Aboriginal enterprise development, tourism, and pastoral and freight productivity.

The corridor also delivers significant national interest outcomes. It strengthens climate resilience and disaster preparedness, provides redundancy to southern freight routes, supports defence and emergency response capability, and aligns with the Regional Australia Institute's *Regionalisation Ambition 2032*, which identifies infrastructure connectivity, resilience and sustainability as core pillars of long-term regional prosperity.

This submission highlights the importance of coordinated, cross-jurisdictional investment and planning across Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. A central aim of this coordinated approach to beyond-road infrastructure is to **improve liveability**—making communities along the Outback Way more attractive places for people to consider living, working and investing, while also enhancing quality of life for those who already call this part of Australia home. It emphasises the role of the **Outback Way Action Plan** as a place-based, evidence-driven framework that captures priorities identified through extensive consultation with communities, councils, Aboriginal organisations and industry.

The OHDC recommends that the Committee recognise the Outback Way as nationally significant infrastructure, support its completion and long-term maintenance, and encourage governments to use the Outback Way Action Plan to translate policy ambition into practical, on-the-ground outcomes that enable emerging industries across Northern Australia.

1. About the Outback Highway Development Council and the Outback Way

The Outback Highway Development Council Inc. (OHDC) is a not-for-profit organisation responsible for advocating, coordinating and promoting the progressive sealing, development and long-term benefit realisation of the Outback Way – a nationally significant east–west corridor spanning approximately 2,720 kilometres from Laverton (WA) to Winton (QLD), via the Northern Territory through Alice Springs. When completed, the Outback Way will be Australia’s third transcontinental highway.

The Outback Way traverses some of the most remote regions in Australia, connecting Aboriginal communities, pastoral operations, mining provinces (including critical minerals), defence-relevant logistics routes, tourism destinations, and emerging renewable energy and communications assets.

Once fully sealed, the corridor will provide a climate-resilient east–west route through the northern interior of Australia, delivering an alternative transcontinental corridor that supports national productivity, domestic supply chains, defence capability, disaster resilience and long-term regional development.

2. Relevance of the Outback Way to Emerging Industries in Northern Australia

The Outback Way is not solely a transport project; it is an enabling platform for emerging industries across Northern Australia. Reliable, all-weather road infrastructure underpins the viability, scalability and sustainability of industries seeking to operate in remote and northern regions.

Emerging industries that directly rely on improved connectivity along the Outback Way include:

- Critical minerals and mining supply chains
- Renewable energy generation and transmission (including solar, hybrid microgrids and hydrogen-adjacent activity)
- Defence logistics, emergency response and national resilience
- Digital services supported by low-earth-orbit satellite infrastructure
- Aboriginal enterprise development and land-based economic participation
- Tourism, including cultural, nature-based and dark-sky tourism
- Freight, livestock and pastoral productivity

Without safe, reliable and sealed transport corridors, the cost of entry and ongoing operation for these industries remains prohibitively high, constraining Northern Australia’s economic diversification and limiting private sector investment.

3. Infrastructure as a Precondition for Emerging Industries

The OHDC submits that transport infrastructure – particularly sealed roads – must be treated as a foundational precondition for emerging industries, rather than a downstream or optional investment.

Unsealed sections of the Outback Way corridor currently:

- Increase freight and logistics costs
- Disrupt supply chains and productivity during weather events
- Restrict workforce mobility and service delivery
- Limit emergency response capability
- Deter private sector investment

The progressive sealing of the Outback Way directly addresses these constraints, enabling industries to plan with certainty, attract capital, integrate technology and operate year-round.

4. Supporting Aboriginal Economic Participation

The Outback Way passes through extensive Aboriginal land, including the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and other culturally significant regions. Emerging industries in Northern Australia must be developed in partnership with Traditional Owners, with infrastructure playing a critical role in enabling equitable participation.

Improved road access supports:

- Aboriginal-owned enterprises and service provision
- Workforce participation, training and mobility
- Access to education, health and digital services
- Cultural tourism, ranger programs and land management activities
- More effective consultation, governance and service coordination

The OHDC emphasises that infrastructure investment must be accompanied by ongoing engagement, capacity building and long-term benefit sharing with Aboriginal communities.

5. Resilience, Climate Adaptation and National Interest

Northern Australia is increasingly exposed to climate variability, extreme weather events and strategic risk. The Outback Way provides an alternative east–west corridor that strengthens national resilience and aligns with the **Regional Australia Institute's Regionalisation Ambition 2032**, which identifies sustainability, resilience and infrastructure connectivity as core enablers of long-term regional prosperity.

In this context, the Outback Way contributes to the national interest by:

- Providing redundancy to southern freight corridors and strengthening domestic supply chains
- Improving disaster response, recovery access and emergency service deployment during extreme weather events
- Supporting defence logistics and strategic mobility across northern and remote Australia
- Enabling decentralised renewable energy, communications and digital infrastructure
- Reducing the cost of remoteness and improving productivity and workforce attraction in regional communities

Emerging industries, particularly in energy, resources and defence-adjacent sectors, require resilient infrastructure that can operate under changing climatic conditions. Importantly, this

resilience is inseparable from liveability—infrastructure that supports safe access, reliable services and connected communities is essential to attracting and retaining the workforce required for these industries and to sustaining the people who already live along the corridor. Sealed transport corridors such as the Outback Way are essential to meeting these requirements and delivering the resilience and productivity outcomes envisaged in national regional development frameworks.

6. The Role of Government Coordination and Long-Term Planning

The OHDC notes the importance of sustained, coordinated investment across jurisdictions. The Outback Way crosses Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland, requiring aligned policy, funding and delivery mechanisms.

Beyond the road itself, the purpose of a coordinated approach is to unlock complementary infrastructure and services that improve liveability across the corridor. This includes access to health, education, housing, digital connectivity, energy reliability and emergency services—factors that influence decisions to live, work and invest in regional and remote Australia.

Improving liveability is critical both to attracting new residents and workforce to Northern Australia and to increasing quality of life, safety and opportunity for existing communities along the Outback Way.

Key considerations for government include:

- Long-term certainty of infrastructure funding
- Cross-jurisdictional coordination, informed by the Outback Way Action Plan, which captures place-based priorities identified through consultation with communities, councils, Aboriginal organisations and industry along the corridor
- Integration of transport planning with industry, energy, housing, health and digital strategies
- Recognition of nationally significant corridors within Northern Australia policy frameworks

The existing Federal and State funding commitment to complete the sealing of the Outback Way by 2032 provides a strong foundation. Continued focus is now required to ensure the broader economic, social, liveability and resilience benefits identified through the Action Plan are realised.

7. Recommendations

The Outback Highway Development Council recommends that the Committee:

1. Recognise sealed transport corridors as critical enablers of emerging industries across Northern Australia.
2. Acknowledge the Outback Way as nationally significant infrastructure supporting economic diversification, resilience and productivity.
3. Support ongoing investment and coordination to complete and maintain the sealing of the Outback Way.
4. Encourage integrated planning that links infrastructure delivery with emerging industry development, Aboriginal economic participation and regional services, using the

Outback Way Action Plan as a place-based evidence source to guide prioritisation and sequencing.

5. Promote a whole-of-government approach to Northern Australia that treats infrastructure as a platform for long-term industry growth rather than a standalone asset, and that leverages existing Action Plans to translate policy ambition into on-the-ground outcomes.

8. In Closing

The Outback Way represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to unlock emerging industries across Northern Australia by providing the infrastructure foundation required for investment, innovation and inclusive growth. The OHDC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and invites the Committee to formally consider the current Outback Way Action Plan, and the soon to be released, updated Outback Way Action Plan as part of its evidence base. The OHDC would also be pleased to provide further information or appear before the Committee if requested.

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