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Hon Peter Batchelor, MP  
Victorian Minister for Transport  
Legislative Assembly  
Spring Street  
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Dear Mr. Batchelor,

**SUBMISSION RE VICTORIA'S COUNTRY RAIL INFRASTRUCTURE**

On behalf of the Railway Technical Society of Australasia (RTSA), please accept this letter as a submission to the current inquiry. This is in the wider context as per earlier submissions to Government (eg to the AusLink Green Paper) that the RTSA believes that conditions of rail track access should be fair and equitable and promote competition between rail operators, and, that Governments at all levels should aim to improve competitive neutrality between rail and road transport along with taking action to improve the provision of accurate and timely data, upgrade infrastructure, and to address skills shortages.

A number of statements have recently appeared in the media regarding the condition of Victoria's country rail network. There have been public calls for an enquiry into matters related to operational safety, and most recently there has been the announcement of a government enquiry into such matters.

The RTSA strongly supports such an enquiry and trusts that it will address the serious matters concerning the condition and future of all of Victoria's rail infrastructure.

The RTSA has made various enquiries of its own and believes that generally there has been under funding of maintenance of the Victorian rail track infrastructure compared to the other national and international railway systems. This appears to be particularly so over the period of the last ten years. This has allowed a potentially very serious situation to develop. In our view, concerns expressed by a range of railway stakeholders in relation to this matter appear to be well justified.

Based on our informal enquiries, the RTSA believes the factual position to be that:

1. From the 1950s to the early 1990's various governments funded the required ongoing track maintenance, and to a degree the upgrading and relaying of a substantial part of the Victorian regional rail network in longer and heavier rail. These tracks remain as part of the Victorian regional system. The upgrading was done to a standard that is suitable for today's wagon and locomotive axle loads, bearing in mind that the usage of many lines in Victoria is generally low by rail industry standards.
2. This 30-year period of government funded investment also created tracks suitable for the introduction from the early 1970's of an up-to-date highly mechanized cyclic maintenance regime to offset rapidly rising labour costs. This cyclic system consisted of replacing defective timber sleepers on each section of line every 3 to 6 years (known as tie renewal) and the associated full re-adjustment of the rail alignment and level (known as track re-surfacing).
3. A fundamental key to adequate track maintenance is to ensure that the rate of annual sleeper renewal across the whole 4000 route km intrastate non-metropolitan network is approximately equal to the rate of deterioration. Provided good quality durable hardwood is used, this equates to an average of approximately 50 of the 1500 (3%) sleepers that support each kilometre of timber sleepere track. Should sleeper renewals across the network in any year be less than this figure (around 200,000 per annum), a long term track maintenance debt is created which eventually affects the safety, capacity and reliability of the network.
4. Information available to the RTSA suggests that for about 40 years (until the early 1990's) the track maintenance requirements of the current rail network were generally met with the routine annual renewal of average 50 sleepers per kilometre.
5. In 1983 extra government funding was provided for the network. By the beginning of the 1990's this had resulted in an average maintenance condition across the network being improved to at least the minimum required, but still with a few speed restrictions remaining.

6. Anecdotal evidence suggests that from the mid 1990's cost cutting took precedence over the robust cyclic track maintenance strategy that had previously existed. As a result, the number of sleepers installed across the system began to drop dramatically below the average annual rate of natural degradation.

7. If reported low sleeper renewal rates over the last 10 years are correct and if they continue, there may now be a substantial backlog of sleepers requiring renewal across the intrastate non-metropolitan network. This will eventually and inevitably result in a significant and very costly catch up program being required or serious problems will emerge. Chief among these problems are:-

A. The ability to run trains safely at pre-existing line speeds and loads will progressively decline. This has already occurred with extensive long term speed reductions on the main Ballarat to Mildura line, amongst others.

B. As the percentage of sleepers aged beyond their useful life increases, the greater the likelihood of permanent damage to the rails. Hence, even if a renewal 'catch-up' was to occur at a later stage, much of the track may never be returned to its previous condition of level and alignment without very costly major rebuilding and potential rail replacement.

C. Once the renewal rate of sleepers being undertaken by a tie-renewal gang approaches an average of 1 in 4 or more, effective quality control of the work and satisfactory adjustment of rail line and level becomes problematic and the cost per unit of the work rises disproportionately.

8. It is doubtful whether supply of the required volume of quality red gum or box timber can be sufficiently restored given that demand for sleepers has been allowed to drastically fall and pressures for limits or bans on sleeper cutting from durable hardwood species have intensified.

9. The rail and ballast are also critical components of the track infrastructure. The condition of these components and their maintenance also should be addressed as part of any infrastructure enquiry.

Very significant funding is now likely to be required to restore the Victorian track condition to appropriate standards. Even if such funding is to be provided, unless sleeper supply can be turned around quickly, the State will face the much more costly options of either totally rebuilding lines with a different type of sleeper (e.g. concrete or steel) or interspersing sleepers of different material amongst the existing sleepers, a practice with its own technical problems. The inevitable alternative to such expenditure may lead to line closures.

There is a good case for both the Victorian and Federal Government providing funds not only for regional rail rehabilitation but also making some further progress towards gauge standardisation. In this regard, we welcome the reference in the AusLink White Paper (p65) re the Geelong–Mildura railway *"The Australian Government will negotiate with the Victorian Government about arrangements for the standardisation of the broad gauge rail track between Geelong and Mildura. In the first five-year plan the Australian Government will provide \$20 million for this purpose. This will greatly enhance operational efficiency and integration."*

The RTSA also appreciates the work of the Australian Rail Track Corporation in its past upgrading the standard gauge track in Victoria, and its proposed further investment. This includes (AusLink White Paper p 39) *The [Federal] Government has also committed \$20 million to a rail bypass of Wodonga. In addition, it is prepared to partner with the Victorian Government, the Australian Rail Track Corporation and Pacific National to fund standardisation of the broad gauge rail track from Melbourne to Albury– Wodonga. This will greatly enhance operational efficiency and integration. The Government will contribute \$25 million to this project once other parties have also committed to it.*

Many RTSA members have considerable skill and experience in technical matters concerning rail track and rail operations. RTSA is happy to assist the enquiry to establish the exact condition of Victoria's rail infrastructure.

The RTSA wishes the Victorian Government well in its efforts to develop an appropriate plan to restore Victoria's rail infrastructure to sound, sustainable fit for purpose condition for the benefit of all Victorians now and into the future.

Yours sincerely,