DERWENT RAIL AND THE WOODCHIP FREIGHT LINK

The Mercury (5 &6/19 ) has noted the Rolley report recommending a$38 million freight link for woodchip transport by upgrading the Plenty road to connect up with the Derwent Valley Railway. This proposal has been backed by the Forest Industry Association.

In an article ‘ Derwent rail and alternative to woodchip port’ (Mercury 5/7/18) I noted in 2004 I had given a paper to the Association of Australia and New Zealand for the Advancement of s Science which looked at the Southwood Report of Forestry Tasmania. This Report considered various routes for carrying out timber products from the Huon including saw logs. At that time I supported its proposal to use the Lane Link Road through the Styx Valley as Plenty Road was not given a safety audit clearance by DIER at that time. The crossing of the Styx required, as now, construction of a sizeable cement bridge replacing the shaky, narrow wooden bridge to take freight traffic.

I had confirmation from Steve Kerrison, then CEO of Pacific National that a transfer station could be built at Karanja for $1 million enable the use of the Derwent Valley Railway through to Brighton to Bell Bay or Burnie. If this was an option it would require an upgrade of the Derwent Valley Railway to take freight, need new signalling provision and other related safety requirements and strengthening of the bridge near the Uxbridge road turnoff This cost would be well in excess of $68 million. Any such upgrade could also impact on the Derwent Valley Railway use for tourist operations by the end of this year.

The Rolley report recommends upgrading the Plenty Link road to pass over a new single lane bridge for freight only over the River Derwent. The freight carried across would then go to railheads at Lawitta, Boyer or the Brighton Transport Hub.

Clearly the construction of this new bridge would be in addition to the $38 million for the Plenty Road upgrade. There are strong arguments for having the railhead for woodchip and log freight at Lawitta rather than the other suggested railheads. The other railheads would be accessed on very narrow roads and before Boyer there is a bridge height limit which would constrain vehicle size and loads. Additionally, the section between the New Norfolk railway station has not been upgraded for over 15 years and would need to be made suitable for freight.

The Rolley report identified the Hobart port as the most suitable export port for forest products including woodchips. The Minister for Resources Sarah Courtney emphasised that Hobart would continue to be available for wood exports but not woodchips. There appears a contradiction here.

At this point it is not clear if and when Southwood will restart. Its woodchips could also use the proposed freight link and the improved freight link via Plenty Road would be capable taking other wood products including logs.

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These views are not those of the above organizations.

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