

8 Public involvement and consultation

Prior to, and as part of the compilation and submission of the NOI (DPI 2005), DPI prepared a strategy to facilitate communication with government organisations and other key stakeholders.

8.1 RECENT CONSULTATION

The current status of public and government consultation in the project since 2005 is detailed below. Some of these discussions are ongoing.

8.1.1 Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage

DEH was contacted in relation to the Project Proposal Reports (PPRs) and the project NOI and Referral during 2005. DEH has assessed the project as being a 'controlled action' under the EPBC Act. It has agreed that the project will be assessed through the NT PER process (as per the bilateral agreement between the two governments).

8.1.1 NT Department of Natural Resources Environment and the Arts

The EPA was contacted about the Guidelines, format and requirements of the PER. Of particular concern to DPI were the ongoing negotiations for Aboriginal Sacred Sites clearances on land proposed to be used for borrow extraction purposes and construction. Some of these assessments and clearances will be necessarily ongoing (owing to the lack of access during the current wet season and the amount of time required to ensure that all necessary consultation is undertaken). These negotiations will continue until the issue of Clearance Certificates by AAPA.

The Land & Water Rural Advisory Service at Darwin and Katherine provided records about the locations of registered groundwater bores, together with details of yield and water quality.

NTPWS was contacted in relation to a number of regional issues in and adjacent to Gregory National Park, particularly as the Victoria Highway road reserve is adjacent to the Gregory National Park. The extraction of road building materials from within the park was refused. Also refused was the building of new fences to protect existing cane grass areas adjacent to the road reserve where this abuts Gregory National Park. This was primarily owing to the difficulties this causes the park managers in relation to weed and fire management programmes.

In relation to the continuing control of pest animals such as stray cattle, buffalo, pigs and black rats, the main outcome was that the NTPWS will continue to develop programmes to control large feral animals as its available funding and resources allows.

NTPWS also provided information in relation to the collection of rubbish as a most effective limiting measure against the proliferation of black rat populations. Trapping programmes were not considered effective owing to the impact they would have on non-target, native species. NTPWS will continue to work with organisations such as the Victoria River District Conservation Association on the extension of viable habitats for the purple-crowned fairy-wren.

NTPWS provided tourist information material to identify important sites in the region. The Chief District Ranger provided comments on PER draft sections concerning management of the biological environment.

The Natural Resources Biodiversity Unit, primarily through Dr John Woinarski, was contacted about threatened species and the conservation measures that would protect the habitat of threatened species, especially the purple-crowned fairy-wren, and regarding measures to limit threatening processes both for this species and in the region of the project. Controlling predators, such as the population of the black rat, was important but this could only be achieved by limiting the spread of sillage and domestic rubbish, which is likely to be a main food source. The species cannot be controlled by trapping or baiting because these practices will impact on non-target, native species.

The Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory Curator of Fish, Dr Helen Larson, was contacted about the occurrence of fish species in the project area and region, including the Angallari grunter. This species is found in the East Baines River in Gregory National Park and the Angallari River at Bradshaw Station. As these catchments are tributaries to the Victoria River, extraction activities in the Victoria River in the vicinity of Coolibah Station are unlikely to impact on the known Angallari grunter population because it is not known to occur in the Victoria River. Additional information about threatened sawfish and ray species and their management was also reviewed with Dr Larson.

8.1.2 Victoria River District Conservation Association

The Victoria River District Conservation Association (VRDCA) was contacted in relation to the potential for establishment and maintenance of habitats for the purple-crowned fairy-wren. VRDCA works in a coordination role in regional conservation issues. It has also campaigned with local landowners and managers and sought funds to protect cane grass habitat areas. It nominated potential fairy-wren habitat protection sites for consideration, plus the names of local interested persons and opportunities for local employment. VRDCA will continue to apply for funding programmes towards these protection works, and will assist the Government on protection programmes as and where possible.

8.1.3 Greening Australia

Correspondence was received from Greening Australia (GA) in November 2005 relating to the feasibility of propagating cane grass for rehabilitation and habitat establishment purposes. GA reported having success with its cane grass transplanting trials at Katherine and registered its interest in possible future revegetation works in the project area.

8.1.4 Aboriginal Groups and clearance authorities

Traditional Owners; NLC; AAPA; the Caring for Country Unit, Ngaliwurru-Wuli Association, Timber Creek; and the Wanimyn People were approached in relation to land ownership issues and provided an informal indication of areas to access for road building materials. AAPA and NLC will approach other traditional landowner groups as appropriate, and when clearances are available will confirm formal approval through the issue of Authority Certificates for the borrow areas.

Traditional Owners for the various areas in the region were approached to advise them that archaeological surveys were about to be conducted, and to provide information to the archaeologist about sites of importance and various species' habitats and traditional uses.

A public meeting was held in Timber Creek between officers of DPI and Traditional Owner groups to provide information regarding the project. The NLC (Timber Creek) advised that it would ensure that all relevant Traditional Owners were advised of the meeting and were issued invitations to attend.

8.1.5 Pastoral and Commercial Land Owners

The Victoria River Inn proprietor was approached about issues concerning the Victoria River project and possible future work camp issues.

The managers of Coolibah Station were contacted about possible sources of road building materials on their freehold lands, and also to obtain permission for all groups of scientists to access the Victoria River for studies required as part of the PER.

8.1.6 Emergency Services—NT Police, Ambulance Service and NT Emergency Service

The Timber Creek Police Station Officer-in-Charge was contacted in April, 2006 in relation to traffic and worker protection issues. Concerns raised included receiving adequate warning of road closures during construction. This would enable Timber Creek Police or Katherine Police to plan for emergencies, including the time required to drive the approximate 90 km or 185 km respectively.

Worker protection from crocodiles at bridge sites was discussed and the NT Police recommended that the NTPWS be contacted about installation of protective aquatic netting either side of the Bridge construction sites. If protective guards are required and these were engaged by the construction contractor, they must hold all relevant licences for themselves and each firearm and have all necessary qualifications and experience. In particular, absolute integrity and discretion must be assured owing to the proximity of a public road and people. This would require approval from the NT Police.

The NT Emergency Services (NTES) supported the project, and recommended that the NT Police at Timber Creek be contacted.

8.1.7 Territory Health Services, Medical Entomology

Territory Health Services was contacted in relation to the construction proposal and gravel sources. Recommendations made included that biting insects in the region can cause disease if the project worksite is within 3 km of waterbodies. As a precaution, personal insect repellent should be made readily available for all workers. Mitigation measures included that all borrow pits should be sited further than 5 km from human populated areas and be free-draining on completion of construction. Bridge and culvert construction sites must not establish or maintain water impoundment depressions that will allow mosquito breeding areas.

8.1.8 Telstra

Telstra was contacted in relation to the proposed alignments and impact that these could have on Telstra infrastructure (OFC and signal repeater stations) adjacent to the Highway. Telstra's concern is for the integrity of its communication networks both during the construction project and after the project's completion.

Potential impact issues relate to the timing of construction with regard to the relocation of its services from existing bridge crossings to new structures such as at the Victoria River Bridge. As the OFC is generally buried at 0.6m to 1m depth, additional fill placed over the services is not an issue. However Telstra would encase 'built-over' services in split conduits to provide additional protection. Vibration from traffic over bridges or from earthmoving machinery during construction is a major potential concern in relation to damage or signal quality. Telstra will monitor disturbances to its OFC from its control centre in Melbourne, relaying instructions to the project site as necessary.

Other potential impacts on the OFC in the region include damage caused by rodents eating through exposed cables or heave, stretching and rock fractures of the OFC that may occur where cables are laid through expansive soils areas. Telstra usually takes special preventative measures to protect its infrastructure where these problems are likely to occur.

8.1.9 Tourism groups, including NT Tourism Commission

The NT Tourism Commission (NTTC) was contacted in relation to issues affecting tourists using or passing through the area. The NTTC offered very positive support to the Highway and bridges upgrade project together with publicity in their two information source publications '*Northern Territory Newsletter*' and '*Tales of the Territory*', which are distributed to travel journalists and booking agents Australia-wide.

The Katherine Regional Tourism Association was contacted and was generally in support of the project as it contributes to tourism access to and from the region. It offered cooperation with publicity efforts to publicise construction activities when they occur.

8.1.10 Department of Defence

The Department of Defence (Defence) was contacted in relation to its operations at BFTA. As the Victoria River Highway and bridges upgrade project improves access between Bradshaw and other Defence installations in the Northern Territory, Defence is interested in the outcomes of the project. However, Defence was concerned about any interruptions to access to BFTA, particularly since it is currently upgrading roads and undertaking new building construction within the training area to allow for the commencement of training activities later in 2006.

To assist with its planning, Defence will be provided with long term forecasts of potential delays that are likely to impact on Victoria Highway traffic, or any special arrangements required. DPI and the contractor undertaking the works will remain in close contact with Defence over these issues.

8.1.11 Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment, Katherine

A meeting was held with Mr Ross Christie in the department's office in Katherine. Mr Christie is a staff member of the department who has been based in Katherine for many years and has considerable experience in the issues concerned with flooding on the Victoria Highway.

He estimated that the Highway is closed for approximately two years out of every three over the long term, but that there were fewer years of closure during the 1960s than there has been in more recent years.

8.2 PAST CONSULTATION (P RIOR TO 2005)

Prior to 2005 detailed consultation was undertaken a range of groups. A synopsis of the discussions with each group consulted is provided in this section.

8.2.1 Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association

A meeting was held with the Association in Darwin. It noted the importance of the cattle industry to the Northern Territory and to Australia and the reliance of the industry on road transport. Transport of cattle is likely to be disrupted by road closures and weight and axle limits following flooding. The Victoria River region produces a significant part of the Northern Territory's total production, and most of this is transported by road to Darwin.

The closure of secondary roads means that there is limited demand for the transport of cattle during the wet season when the Highway is most likely to be closed by flooding. Therefore, most cattle transport occurs during the dry season. In addition to the actual closure of the Highway by flooding, the longer periods of time when there are weight restrictions on heavy vehicle use also causes significant disruption to cattle transport.

It was agreed that better flood protection would assist in the transport of cattle.

8.2.2 Australian Trucking Association, Northern Territory

A meeting was held with the Executive Officer of this Association in its office in Darwin.

The reliability of the Victoria Highway is important for the trucking industry in the Northern Territory since the Highway is a critical link. The times of closure from flooding are a concern to the industry, as is the additional time of closure owing to weight restrictions on the road following inundation.

Freight carried on this section of the Victoria Highway includes a range of different loads and destinations. Major transport groups use the link between Darwin and Kununurra, the freight including produce from the Ord region as well as fuel. The produce is seasonal but the transport extends over a large part of the year owing to the range of crops produced. Fuel transport occurs throughout the year. Other freight is transported between Perth and Darwin, and this freight transport is required throughout the whole year.

Because there is no practical alternative route to this Highway, closure, both from flooding and during the periods of load restrictions, is a major problem for freight companies. It was noted that transport companies have had to adjust to the closures.

8.2.3 McCaffertys Express Coaches

There are a number of companies that run coaches along the Victoria Highway. Discussions were held with McCaffertys Express Coaches as a representative of all these companies.

McCaffertys has one coach travelling each way every day on the Victoria Highway; that is, between Darwin and Perth. Other coaches operated by other companies also use the Highway and have similar schedules.

Closure of the Highway affects coach operation both during the time when the Highway is inundated and also during the following periods of weight restrictions. The crossing of the Victoria River was identified as a particular point of concern as the location where the Highway is closed first and for the longest period of time.

The closure of the Highway is a significant disruption to the operation of the passenger transport business and an inconvenience to the passengers.

8.2.4 Timber Creek Community Government Council

The community of Timber Creek is the only relatively large community located on the Highway and discussions were held with the Works Supervisor of the Council.

He noted that there were a number of locations where the Highway is closed, not only at the Victoria River Highway crossing. All of these crossings are primarily affected by backwater from the Victoria River, rather than from local catchment run-off. Because the crossings of the other watercourses are affected by backwaters, they are closed for a similar period of time to the Victoria River Highway Bridge. However, the Victoria River is the crossing that is closed first and for the longest period of time.

The Council representative noted that the Highway has been closed almost every year for the past nine years, for periods of time up to five weeks. He noted that the community of Timber Creek adjusts to the inconvenience of the road closure.

8.2.5 Victoria River Inn

The Victoria River Inn is located on the western side of the Victoria River crossing. Discussions were held with the current proprietor of the Inn who has been at the roadhouse for three years. The establishment itself has been there for 27 years.

The proprietor was aware that the worst flooding at the roadhouse occurred in 1991 when the water was over 1 m deep through the buildings. This information agrees with the recorded data from the stream gauge located at the river crossing. This was the only occasion when the water level has been above the floor level of the building, although it has been close to the buildings at other times, including during 2006. The longest period of closure of the Highway was in 2003, when it was closed for three weeks.

During the times of closure, travellers have been stranded at the Inn, sometimes for extended periods of time, and this is a concern for the management of the roadhouse owing to limited re-supply of goods and health concerns. The stranded travellers have included international tourists who were not aware of the risk of road closure. While the road is often closed by floodwater, the proprietor could only remember one occasion where there was a motorist who was washed off the road (2003). During times of closure of the Highway, goods for the roadhouse can only be transported by road to a point about 5 km east of the roadhouse, and it is necessary to transport them by helicopter from that point, which is expensive and inconvenient.

His observations of flooding in the area were that the Victoria River is the only crossing where there is fast-flowing water, the other crossings all having slow-moving backwaters. The Victoria River was also the lowest crossing point and is closed first. It had been observed that there are a number of points on the Highway to the west of the crossing where the road is closed, particularly at the creeks. There is also a location to the east of the crossing, between the Victoria River and Escarpment Creek, where it is closed by backwaters. While the Highway is sometimes closed by flooding elsewhere on the total route between Katherine and Kununurra, the times of closure at these points are relatively short.

8.2.6 Main Roads Department, Western Australia

Discussions were held with the Main Roads Department in Kununurra, which provided background information on the flooding issues for the Highway from the Western Australian perspective. Since Kununurra is located on the western end of the Highway section, flood closures are of concern to the Western Australian Government as well as to the Northern Territory. There are flood closure problems on Western Australian roads, but for much shorter periods of time compared to those in the Northern Territory.

The Highway in the Kimberley region of Western Australia is being upgraded, and the recent upgrading of the Ord River crossing (located east of Kununurra) has provided an improvement in wet season access. The current worst location as far as flood closure is concerned is the Dunham River crossing, which is closed almost every year but for a relatively short period of time. The other locations prone to flooding are being upgraded by the department.

It was noted that the Western Australian Government is encouraging tourism during the wet season and that there is considerable potential for growth if the flood protection of the Highway is improved. The agricultural production in the Ord will also expand in the next few years. Produce from the Ord is transported to both the east and west, and the freight towards the east is affected by flooding on the Victoria Highway. Other freight, including fuel and materials for the mining industry, is also important.

He also confirmed that freight is sometimes transported to the north on the southern route (over 1000km further by road) when the Victoria Highway is closed for an extended period of time.