



27 February 2023

Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: [RDIT.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:RDIT.reps@aph.gov.au)

**RE: NFF submission to Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network**

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport (the Committee) on the inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network.

The NFF is the national peak body representing Australian farmers and agriculture. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and length of the sector.

Australian agriculture is heavily dependent on freight and logistics. Everything produced on an Australian farm will be transported on an Australian road before it reaches its final consumer. Farmers require safe, efficient, and competitive road infrastructure to get their products to consumers and maintain viable businesses.

The impact of severe weather events on the national regional, rural and remote road network is immense, as much of Australia continues to experience drought, bushfire and flooding events. Over the past few months alone, devastating floods have swallowed crops and pastures and caused major infrastructure damage, creating heartache for farmers and food shortages in our supermarkets.

A recent survey of farmers in New South Wales found two in three farmers were experiencing flooding for the second year running. These events have significantly reduced farm production and caused significant damage to infrastructure, severing local and arterial supply lines needed to move produce to customers.

Regional and rural communities impacted by flooding and other natural disasters require urgent, adequate support from the Australian Government to recover and reconstruct road infrastructure.

The impact of road network damage on farm businesses is worsened by the pre-existing costly and ineffective nature of Australia's landside freight network. That is, our \$85 billion sector's profitability and international competitiveness is already significantly diminished by Australia's costly and ineffective landside freight. According to a 2020 LEK Consulting benchmarking study up to 50% of the final price of grain can go towards freight and logistics, and those Australian producers pay significantly more per kilometre of grain freighted than grain producers in competing countries. These ludicrous costs for Australian farmers only further spiral when severe weather events create additional delays and inefficiencies on the road network.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that extreme weather events – such as floods, heatwaves, fires and droughts – will become more frequent and more severe due to climate change.<sup>1</sup> We must proactively ensure the preparedness of Australia’s road infrastructure to increased climate-change induced pressures. We strongly recommend the Committee consider the recommendations of Austroads 2004 report to address the *Impact of Climate Change on Road Infrastructure*.<sup>2</sup>

With the need to repair damaged road networks comes an opportunity to support preparedness. It would be irresponsible of the Australian Government to fail to utilise road infrastructure repairs to also support enhanced resilience and robustness of infrastructure to withstand future climate change-induced stresses.

The NFF makes the following recommendations, as provided in our 2023-24 Federal Pre-Budget Submission.

**Recommendation 1: \$1 billion over four years regional road and infrastructure reconstruction for councils impacted by flooding and other natural disasters to ensure the rebuild is to a standard that is more resilient to future disaster events.**

In recent months, thousands of kilometres of local roads across NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland have been severely damaged by flooding, and in some cases have been washed away.

Local Government NSW declared a state-wide roads emergency as successive floods and torrential rains events, coupled with chronic funding constraints have caused \$2.5 billion in damage and the collapse of the NSW local and regional road network. A further \$1. billion in similar damage has been estimated across both Victoria and Queensland. The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) estimates that at least \$3.8 billion in road and related infrastructure damage has been caused by recent severe weather events across New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria alone, resulting in catastrophic damage cutting off communities and severely disrupting freight movements.

A recent NRMA report showed that across 2021–22, councils in NSW alone reported a maintenance backlog of over \$1.9 billion of which \$1.5 billion was attributed to councils in regional and rural areas. This is a pattern that is replicated across the country.

Councils in South Australia are still experiencing flooding from the River Murray while other States and Territory local governments are still rebuilding road infrastructure from flooding and cyclones.

Additional federal funding is urgently needed to supplement the emergency funding already allocated by State governments to help ensure that when the roads and related infrastructure are re-built, they will not just be reinstated but rebuilt stronger, better, and more able to withstand the challenge posed by future natural disasters.

The NFF recommends:

- A one-off injection of \$1 billion at \$250 million per annum over four years to bolster existing federal road and infrastructure funding that regional councils receive including from Roads to Recovery, Financial Assistance Grants and the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program.
- The funding would be directed to disaster-impacted councils (any council where a disaster has been declared in the past three years).

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<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Sixth Assessment Report* (2021) <<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Austroads, *Impact of Climate Change on Road Infrastructure* (2004) <[https://www.bitre.gov.au/sites/default/files/cr\\_001\\_climate\\_change.pdf](https://www.bitre.gov.au/sites/default/files/cr_001_climate_change.pdf)> .

**Recommendation 2: An increase in recurrent Roads to Recovery funding from \$500 million to \$800 million annually.**

Following the recent severe flooding and torrential rains across the eastern seaboard states, the Roads to Recovery program needs to be enhanced as an ongoing preventative maintenance program. This is to ensure that the wider road networks unaffected by the recent spate of natural disasters are robust and resilient enough to withstand future climate change-induced stresses on the road network and thus avoid massive road reconstruction bills seen across NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

The Roads to Recovery Program has provided vital financial support to councils across the country to maintain and support the nation's local roads infrastructure assets. With close to 80 percent of Australia's road network owned and managed by local councils, it is critical that the program be extended beyond June 2024, and additional funds are injected into the program to further assist councils in better maintaining their road network.

The NFF are seeking:

- An ongoing increase in the Roads to Recovery program of \$300 million taking it from \$500 million per annum to \$800 million per annum and a continuation of the current funding model that distributes the funding according to a formula based on population and to the Northern Territory.
- Addressing the South Australian road funding anomaly by making the additional \$20 million per annum to South Australia in 2021-22 and permanent in 2022-23.

An increase in the ongoing allocation of \$500 million per annum to \$80 million will help to address the widespread infrastructure backlog on local roads and enable councils to upgrade arterial and local supply lines, which farmers require to access consumers. It will curtail the under-investment in local roads and enable councils to maintain compromised roads and improve local roads, help boost road safety outcomes as well as allow councils to better forward-plan road maintenance and improvements.

**Recommendation 3: \$300 million per annum over four years for councils to improve freight productivity on their road networks to support the implementation of new Heavy Vehicle National Law Reforms.**

The cost and reliability of freight is a challenge to the international competitiveness of Australian exporters, particularly the agricultural sector, where more than 70 per cent of farmgate output is exported. While issues at our waterfront and with international shipping have preoccupied media headlines and policy responses, the first and last mile of the freight journey has always been a critical challenge in Australia.

From an agricultural perspective, the main issue is the inability to effectively utilise high productivity vehicles for the agricultural freight task due to inappropriate, ad-hoc and inconsistent local road access.

Road managers within local governments often have limited resources to dedicate to road access issues, are over risk averse to any perceived notion that access may cause, noting the financial impost of road maintenance for local councils. Feedback from NFF members suggest road access for HPVs on local roads are ad-hoc, inconsistent over time and local government jurisdiction, and assessments on road wear and tear skewed to minimising access.

The NFF recommends that the Australian Government provide \$30 million per annum over four years for councils to improve freight productivity on their road networks to support the implementation of new Heavy Vehicle National Law Reforms, including to:

- Support councils to implement a new national heavy vehicle automated access system including network pilot projects in 2023–24

- Provide route and asset assessment support to councils to better understand the condition of infrastructure to enable better-informed access decisions.
- Provide capability building and data collection support to councils to enable them to align with national data standards and prepare their systems to integrate with the automated national heavy vehicle access system.
- Support fixing, upgrading and maintaining key freight route infrastructure identified by councils and the freight sector to support increased productivity on first and last-mile council freight networks.

Existing funding schemes that could be rolled into this funding include the Strategic Local Government Asset Assessment Project (SLGAAP) and the Heavy Vehicle Safety and Productivity Program (HVSPP).

This funding will ensure that pavement quality, bridges and culverts can support freight movements by better assessing their capacity, and through pre-approved online permits, without the need for manual assessments, ensuring that freight moves freely and unimpeded across local road networks.

The NFF thanks the Committee for the opportunity to respond to the inquiry. The policy contact for this matter is Charlotte Wundersitz, Policy Officer (Trade & Economics) via e-mail: [cwundersitz@nff.org.au](mailto:cwundersitz@nff.org.au) or phone (02) 6269 5666.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Tony Mahar', written in a cursive style.

**TONY MAHAR**  
Chief Executive Officer