

Groups rail against line closures
Countryman 19/02/09, General News, pg 5
Lara Ladyman

Farmers, shires and industry, so fed up with the buck passing and inaction by successive governments over whether they put their hands in their pockets to stop thousands of kilometres of railway track from closure, have given the State Government an ultimatum. Their worst fears - that lives will be lost as more grain is forced on to roads - tragically occurred at the weekend.

The circumstances of the accident that claimed an Ellenbrook woman's life are not known, but with an extra 200 additional road trains a week forced on to roads in the Albany Zone alone, it is a horrific reminder of what industry and community are concerned about if rail is forced to close and roads are not equipped to cope.

By the start of next month, the WA Government must let members of the Grain Infrastructure Group know whether it will fund its share of the Rail Rescue Package, to the tune of around \$133 million.

If it fails to meet the deadline, Westnet Rail has said it will start to implement track closures. Up to 2300km of track are in question. Westnet Rail will release details of which lines are scheduled for closure.

With just two weeks until the March 1 deadline, WA Transport Minister Simon O'Brien had nothing new to add but said he was reviewing the situation and there would be something soon.

"No decision has been made yet because aspects of the proposal need further detailed analysis, especially given the current economic situation," he said.

"Be assured that the Government will not support rail line closures and any further investment will be aimed at lifting standards and improving the overall network.

"Negotiations are already being progressed between the State and Federal governments to determine the best level of appropriate support."

But farm lobby groups CBH, Westnet Rail, the Australian Railroad Group and the Local Government Association have heard it all before.

They have pleaded with successive governments - Federal and State - for more than two years and now just want a simple yes or no so they can plan.

The Federal Government has pledged to fund a third share of the \$400 million, the promise made in a letter to Colin Barnett before Christmas, pending updating and reapproving the numbers in light of deregulation and the time lapse.

Industry has guaranteed a third share - its contribution in the form of slip-roads and rapid rail loading facilities.

But so far former and present governments have failed to deliver.

CBH operations and logistics manager Tim Collins said failure of the governments to make a commitment was starting to "really bite".

The first concern was the social cost of the extra grain freight being forced on the roads. In addition, growers were having to pay more and future investment decisions were in limbo. Without the funding, Countryman understands the Wagin to Albany track is one earmarked for closure.

Mr Collins said that because re-sleeper work was needed on the track, the trains on that stretch had not been able to run during the day because of heat restrictions.

Trains could only operate at night and instead of achieving 12-14 train cycles a week to Albany port, CBH was only able to get seven cycles, hindering the grain transport task.

The result was an additional 200 road trains a week, at peak demand periods, on this stretch of road, a cost the rural communities fear if repeated across the State will be counted in lives lost.

It is also adding about \$5-\$10/t to move the grain to port because the system is not operating efficiently, a cost in the end paid by the grower.

"None of us wants to see grain come off rail but the ball is in the Government's court,"

WAFarmers transport spokesman John Hassell said.

"If the Government doesn't get its act together we are going to lose our rail system," he said.

"It will mean huge numbers of extra trucks on the road and massive amounts of extra truck movements through the city."