

Operator may close four tracks
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WA's rail network operator has declared that trains will stop running on four tracks before the end of June if the State Government fails to come up with funding.

The warning from Westnet Rail general manager Paul Larsen comes after the Government failed to respond to an industry imposed March 1 deadline to let the grains industry and rail operators know if it would put up the funds asked for.

Mr Larsen said discussions had begun with other members of the grain infrastructure group over the timing and route of track closures, with some announcements on particular lines expected by the end of this month.

They were also meeting the relevant Government ministers.

"We are still hopeful of an outcome with Government - although we don't have anything concrete at this stage," Mr Larsen said.

"But without a government funding announcement we will be announcing this month that train operations will cease on four lines before the end of the financial year and train operations will cease on four lines in addition to those four, before harvest."

Speaking after the deadline had passed, Transport Minister Simon O'Brien said that under the lease agreement Westnet could not surrender lines before July 1 this year.

The Grains Industry Association has also added its weight to the debate reiterating calls for urgent action by the Government to stave off line closures and address the deteriorating state of the grain freight system in WA.

GIWA chairman Tony Critch said the current backlog of bulk grain ships off WA ports was a reflection of the lack of much-needed public investment in the system and particularly in the rail network.

"It is unfortunate it has taken the shipping delays to highlight the choke-points in our otherwise very efficient grain storage and handling system - the capacity of our transport pipeline," Mr Critch said.

"The CBH Group's ability to accelerate the volume of grain wanted by marketers at its port terminals has been severely compromised by the poor state of the rail network and the lack of a co-ordinated road-rail solution to transport grain in WA.

"While ships have been queuing off the coast, we have seen trains either parked on hot days or running at extremely slow speeds because of the danger of derailing on poor tracks.

"The grains industry has been calling for reinvestment for many years in the track network to avoid mass line closures and wholesale shift of grain freight to road.

"We have reached a critical point. Either we improve the rail network or buyers of grain may continue to be frustrated in securing grain from WA when they want it."