

Grain rail network under threat in maintenance dispute
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The private operator of the State's ageing country freight rail network has threatened to close at least four lines - throwing the grain handling industry into chaos - unless the State partly funds urgent maintenance.

Farmers, shires and industry gave the Government until March 1 to say whether it would fund its share - about \$133 million of a \$400 million package - or Westnet Rail would start cutting train operations.

Details of which routes on 2300km of dilapidated, narrow-gauge track would be affected are being discussed with industry groups.

WA's main grain-handling body, Co-operative Bulk Handling, has asked farmers to use their own trucks to get the harvest to port, saying the network was at breaking point.

The Pastoralists and Graziers Association of WA held talks yesterday with representatives from the WA Grain Infrastructure Group over the issue.

A Westnet Rail spokesman warned train operations could cease on four lines by June 30 because of efficiency concerns. He said tracks needed urgent upgrades but it is understood lines in the eastern Wheatbelt area are of particular concern.

Westnet Rail said trains were forced to slow down or not run during the day because of concerns tracks would expand in the heat, causing delays.

The spokesman said although the company was heartened by the Federal Government's announcement of a review into the grain rail network, the Government needed to invest in "an important State-owned asset".

PGA spokesman Geoff Gare said part of the congestion problem was that CBH had too many receival bins to service. He said there were about 200 bins but CBH needed only 60.

Mr Gare said CBH had been unable to cope with the deregulation of the wheat marketing system and claimed there was "no proper plan in place" for improving the grain rail network.

CBH chief executive Imre Mencshelyi said track closures would force more grain on to the road and result in receival bins being closed. He said separate shuttle services to receival points could streamline operations.

Transport Minister Simon O'Brien said in Parliament last night Westnet had a 49-year lease, which was signed in 2000. He said the Government would make a decision on whether rail lines remained opened or were closed.

"I want to make it quite clear that I will not be supporting any general closures of grain rail line," he said.

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