



Rail Revival Alliance Victoria Murray Basin Rail Plan A Way Forward

The Murray Basin Rail Plan was poorly conceived, badly planned and appallingly executed.

The Rail Revival Alliance expressed considerable concern when the project was first announced prior to the 2014 state election. It warned the Andrews government of the dangers in the approach that was being taken particularly with regards to the wholesale removal of the broad gauge line facilities. The Alliance raised the issue of lower speeds and significantly longer travel times once the Maryborough to Ararat section was opened which added an additional 130 km. to the journey to the port.

The Alliance pointed out the operational difficulties faced by commercial operators in the day-to-day carriage both of agricultural produce and containerised freight. Even after significant consultation with the Department of Transport very little was done to address the very real issues that the Rail Revival Alliance put on the table. Surprisingly, no other stakeholder group chose to back the calls for significant changes to the plan which would have averted the disaster that we are faced with today.

Rail gauge standardisation holds widespread support from both industry and the community. Implementation has always been the problem. There are inherent difficulties associated with maintaining and operating train system and changing the gauge of the lines at the one time. The aims of the Murray Basin Rail Plan, even if they had been correctly implemented, were modest but with poor planning and major project dysfunctions, the budget has been virtually exhausted with only stage 1 being completed.

In general terms, the line between Maryborough and Yelta has been considerably improved since the standardisation. Higher tracks speeds and the virtual elimination of temporary speed restrictions are a significant result of this work.

However the wholesale removal of broad gauge yards and other infrastructure without providing standard gauge replacements has severely limited operations.

Shoddy workmanship and use of substandard materials on the Maryborough to Ararat line has resulted in significantly slower speeds and an overall loss of efficiency. The failure to replace dilapidated sleepers and ageing rail on the Murrayville line has resulted in a similar outcome. A maximum line speed of 25 km/hr is all that is allowed. Very soon, that whole line will deteriorate further and will be unable to carry any rail traffic. This is in light of a bumper grains harvest and significant investment by GrainCorp in rail terminal facilities at Murrayville.

One of the major drivers of the whole project was the need to provide access from Northern Victoria to Hamilton and to the Port of Portland with the possibility of transporting mineral sands. This was driven in large part by the possibility of mineral sands mining in the north-west or southern New South Wales. There were also proposals for additional export grain to go through the Port of Portland.

This was a false premise. In the past four years, only a handful of trains have been operating on the line. The mineral sands operation which had been sending ore for treatment at Hamilton is in fact closed. There is no immediate prospect of significant tonnages of mineral sands traffic on the Portland line.

The depressing reality of the configuration as of November 2020 is that round trip between the Port of Geelong and locations along the Mildura line is 260 km longer today than what was five years ago - a commercially unsustainable situation.

Another key component of the project was increasing the axle loading on individual trains from the current 19 to 23 tonnes. This increases the train efficiency as larger tonneages can be carried without significantly increasing the cost of running each train. This has not been achieved.

A revised Murray Basin Rail Plan

The Murray Basin Rail Project needs to be reassessed and reconfigured. There has to be a new set of priorities established which are consistent with the efficient handling of grains, containerised freight and, where appropriate, passenger services.

The Rail Revival Alliance accepts that this is in climate of limited capital with significant reluctance by the Federal Government to spend more than they had originally contributed.

It is the view of the Rail Revival Alliance that the priority in the short term is to improve efficiency in the Gheringhap to Yelta corridor – the main Mildura line.

1 The line between Maryborough and Gheringhap needs to be standardised which would involve the dual gauging of the Maryborough to Gheringhap line.

This option is the best of a bad set of alternatives. Dual gauge operations involved limitations to track speed, complications in track design and a higher risk of derailments. However there is no other alternative that will provide port access for both broad and standard gauge freight trains, that will keep travel distances to a minimum and allow for continued passenger train services to Maryborough.

2. Standard gauge terminal and Yard facilities would need to be reinstated at Maryborough, Dunolly and Donald with additional facilities provided at Merbein. Maryborough Yard must provide sufficient facilities for the storage and shunting of trains and provide for a crossing loop for both broad and standard gauge. The Maryborough fuel point should be reopened and again access provided for both broad and standard gauge locomotives. The existing manual crossing loops should be upgraded to automatic status. Additional loops may be required between Maryborough and Gheringhap to ensure the efficient passage of trains.

The wholesale destruction of yards in sidings on the Mildura line as part of the standardisation has caused significant operational issues for the freight operators. The suggested list of facilities to be reinstated is a bare minimum to allow for the efficient movement of freight on the line

3. An accelerated program maintenance and upgrade of the line between Ouyen and Murrayville involving sleeper replacement and associated works.

This line which services the major grain terminal at Murrayville needs a significant sleeper replacement as well as other track works to bring it up to operational standard.

4. The Sea Lake and Manangatang lines should remain broad gauge in the immediate future but both lines also need significant sleeper replacement and other track and civil works. Any sleepers used in this upgrade must be gauge convertible, and preferably steel sleepers which are used extensively interstate and are cheaper than concrete but more long lasting than timber. As part of this upgrade, the section of line between Inglewood and Eaglehawk should be immediately reopened. This will allow broad gauge trains on these two lines a shorter path to Melbourne and Geelong ports.

Standardisation of these lines is not of critical importance as long as the current works allow continued access to the Port of Melbourne. Considering the state of these two lines, an intensive program of sleeper replacement and other track works is essential. Any sleepers being used should be both broad and standard gauge. Standardisation should only occur when there is significant demand to access either the Port of Portland or the mineral sands treatment plant at Hamilton from Northern Victoria. This would be dependent on the opening of a significant mineral sands mining operation in the north-west

6. With regard to safe-working, an system of Electronic Train Orders (ETO) is about to be trialled in the Bendigo district and should expedite train working. It would be very suitable for the Mildura line. The existing crossing loops on the line should to be automated to improve safety standards and expedite the crossing of trains.

The current system of hand written train order and non automated loops is out of date and not consistent with efficient traffic management on the line.

7. A daily shuttle passenger train between Maryborough and Mildura as has been proposed by the Rail Revival Alliance should be introduced.

Refer to: *Rails to Recovery - Mildura Passenger Train proposal V11.0*

The need for the reintroduction of a passenger rail service to Mildura has been established over the years. The 70,000 residents of the North West are the largest community in Australia who are not served by a passenger rail service. The real advantage to freight is that the passenger service will ensure that the line is kept in top class condition. For too long, the Victorian freight-only lines have been through a boom and bust scenario where the line is repaired and upgraded and then left to fall back into a state of total disrepair with severe speed limits and potentially dangerous infrastructure. This does not happen to passenger lines as the public is all too ready to complain to VLine or their local politicians or media. A freight/passenger shared line will ensure that the facilities are maintained to the highest level.

This seven point program will lift the overall efficiency of the Murray Basin rail lines and will optimise the main Yelta to Gheringhap line as a significant artery. Under this plan, rail will be able to efficiently compete for both agricultural produce and containerised traffic along this corridor which will significantly relieve the pressure on the road network.

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