

Friends of the Northern Railway

Rail Freight Opportunities in the Northern Tablelands

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One of the missions of Friends of the Northern Railway (FONR) is to seek ways to encourage more freight to be transported by rail into and out of the Northern Tablelands region. FONR seeks to influence local and statutory government authorities, business groups and primary producers to encourage the use of the rail system as an alternative to road transport, and to have better integration of rail with road transport for local freight distribution. There are strong social, environmental and economic reasons for attempting to increase rail's share of the national, as well as regional, freight loading. It is timely in 2003 to further pursue these aims as deregulation of the rail industry has occurred, with Freight Corp having been sold to the Patrick-Toll consortium in 2002 and other rail freight service providers now operating in New South Wales. It is the view of FONR that there are many opportunities that could be investigated to increase rail's share of freight loading in the Northern Tablelands region.

There are several independent (private) rail freight service providers already active in New South Wales and it is anticipated that local government and business in the Northern Tablelands region should be discussing options with these potential providers. FONR's vision is for a regional rail freight centre for the Northern Tablelands to be developed, sensibly at Armidale, and with a regular and reliable rail freight service. Local government groupings will probably need to provide the initial impetus for such a scenario, with investment in a rail freight centre (e.g. refurbishment of the existing facility at Armidale) and discussion with service providers such as Freight Australia, Interrail, Silverton and Lachlan Valley.

Freight into the region

In recent years, the only rail freight into the Northern Tablelands region was *superphosphate*. This commodity was delivered from Incitec in Newcastle to the unloading and distribution facility at Dumaresq (about 10 km northwest of Armidale) and it had been a long term operation, dating back decades.

Typical annual volumes in recent years have been approximately 10000-20000 tonnes and shipments were brought in by Freight Corp and subsequently, Austrac, in volumes of approximately 500-900 tonnes on a basis of about one shipment per fortnight. With the cessation of services by Austrac in June, 2002 and the subsequent withdrawal of that company from providing rail freight operations, the Dumaresq superphosphate facility has been supplied by road transport and thus the New England region lost its only freight delivered by rail. Subsequent discussions between Incitec and Freight Australia did not result in any contractual agreement to deliver superphosphate by rail.

Opportunities for other types of freight into the region

Petroleum products

These products are currently delivered to Tamworth by rail by Freight Australia and thus it is logical that the same arrangement could be implemented at Armidale. A regional distribution point for petroleum products could be implemented in Armidale, as was the situation prior to about 1990 when rail delivery of petroleum products formerly ceased.

Stock feeds and grain

Containerised loads of stock feed and grain could be transported by rail into region for distribution to stock feed suppliers, grain merchants and cattle feedlots.

Freight out of the region

Woodchips and other timber products

For many years, large tonnages of woodchips have been trucked from Walcha to Newcastle for export. It is estimated that several hundred tonnes of this product per week have been transported from the Fennings sawmill at Walcha. Some years ago, Freight Corp attempted to secure a share of this market but failed. New developments in both the hardwood and softwood timber industry in the Walcha area again make it timely to re-investigate the opportunities to move a share of timber products (both woodchips and sawn timber) by rail. It would be logical to have timber products transported as backloading from the delivery of superphosphate to Dumaresq. The Walcha Council may have had an interest in facilitating negotiations on the timber products issue.

Other opportunities for the rail transportation of timber products from elsewhere in the New England region (e.g. from east of Glen Innes) could be investigated in the future.

Meat products

Containerised loadings of meat from the abattoir at Inverell could be transported by rail from Armidale. Several tens of containers per week could be anticipated.

Mineral products

Lime products from the quarry operation at Riverton, near Tenterfield, could be trucked to Armidale for rail distribution. In the future, restoration of the rail line to Glen Innes could facilitate such an operation.

Although not directly in the Northern Tablelands area, the DMM lime product operation at Attunga, north of Tamworth, presents an opportunity for rail transport of containerised and bulk loadings. Several tens of thousands of tonnes of lime products per annum are produced and loadings from Tamworth could be investigated.

Although presently not in operation, the Hillgrove mine east of Armidale could present an opportunity for containerised transport of mineral products by rail. Assuming that the mine recommences operation in the near future, production of antimony concentrates might increase on previous levels to several thousand tonnes per annum.

Wool

Wool constitutes a large and completely lost rail freight market. Historically, much wool from the highly productive and highly valued Northern Tablelands region was transported by rail. The market was lost in the 1980's due to competition from road transport and the inability of the predecessor of Freightcorp to modernise and compete. A market of several hundred thousand bales per annum is currently present. Integrated use of road and rail of containerised loadings from the farm gate would be a logical approach, but careful skills would be required to re-establish the market for rail. Leaders of the wool industry in the region would need to be convinced that an integrated approach would work and deliver.

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