

Submission to National Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program

SEATS has resolved to strongly requests the Australian government ensure that within 5 years **all national and state highways achieve a 95% mobile telephony reception coverage** and that the rollout commence on the Monaro Highway and the Princes Highway between Sydney and Melbourne.

SEATS Resolution 2022

Introduction

SEATS (South East Australia Transport Strategy) provides highly co-ordinated and influential advocacy for the development of transport infrastructure in the South East Australian region that supports sustainable economic development and the prosperity of its constituents.

SEATS formed in the mid 1990s, is an alliance of Local Government and other Government agencies together with industry that is concerned about the state of the freight transport network across south eastern Australia, including Victoria, ACT and New South Wales. The organisation meets quarterly, has a paid secretariat and evaluates projects across all forms of transport that its membership has prioritised as worthy of Government and operator support.

Some projects have commenced either in a planning or construction phase. Some projects extend across Victoria, New South Wales as well as the ACT. It is pointed out that much of the freight concerned is not destined for metropolitan markets but from manufacturing centre to manufacturing hub or to port facilities for export.

Preamble

SEATS has been active since 1994, but it would be fair to say that telecommunications for the “COMMUNITY IN TRANSIT” was identified as a critical issue during the period of the Black Summer Bushfires.

Context of SEATS and Transport Infrastructure

The SEATS region encompasses several key production areas:

- ✓ Situated at the foot of the Illawarra Escarpment, the Illawarra-Shoalhaven area is industrialised, featuring steel manufacturing, chemical production (including ethanol), nutraceuticals, food products, and building materials.
- ✓ The NSW southern tablelands are notable for their robust agricultural output, quarry supplies, manufacturing, and timber processing operations.

- ✓ The ACT serves as a major urban centre focused on governmental administration.
- ✓ The NSW south coast boasts a mixed economy with prominent manufacturers such as Bega Cheese and the Manildra Group.
- ✓ Victoria's Gippsland region produces horticultural goods and other food products that necessitate essential freight and transport links to Sydney and agricultural processing hubs around Bega and Eden Port.
- ✓ Additionally, the Gippsland area supplies horticultural and processed goods including foodstuff to Melbourne.

The region handles substantial volumes of inbound and outbound freight, with significant exports passing through Port Melbourne, Port Eden, and Port Kembla. Freight movement within and beyond the region relies heavily on existing road and rail networks, notably the Princes Highway and Monaro Highway corridors.

SEATS places great emphasis on the ongoing enhancement of the Princes Highway and Monaro Highway corridors, recognizing the importance in supporting the integrated transport network initiatives undertaken by the government to improve connectivity between ports, key freight precincts, and domestic distribution centres. This strategic aim is to foster sustainable communities by ensuring a reliable and safe road network that facilitates access to high-value employment opportunities and social amenities.

The Program

SEATS acknowledges that RRAMP is an Australian Government initiative aimed at enhancing multi-carrier mobile coverage on highways and major roads in regional and remote areas of Australia. This initiative will also improve safety, promote economic growth, enhance social connectivity, and support regional development.

The Program's stated outcomes include:

- ✓ Investment in the construction of new infrastructure and upgrades to existing infrastructure to provide new or improved multi-carrier mobile coverage;
- ✓ Increased mobile connectivity and coverage in regional and remote areas, along highways and major roads, and at strategic locations; and
- ✓ Improved road safety, liveability, and equality for regions.

SEATS recognises the poor coverage for telecommunications in the south east corner of Australia predominantly within the shires of East Gippsland in Vic and Bega Valley and Snowy Monaro in NSW.

SEATS also appreciates that telemetric services via mobile tower facilities is most probably not going to be effective within this already poorly serviced area of south east Australia.

SEATS advocates for additional emphasis within these outcomes to:

- ✓ Support the freight task and those working to deliver it daily,
- ✓ Support for remote workers in this region who have employers responsible to look after their safety and know their whereabouts,
- ✓ Enhance resilience and support for corridors vital to disaster management and the flow of essential supplies, and
- ✓ Ensure connectivity for those isolated on key transport corridors during natural disasters.

It is understood that the Australian Government, in collaboration with the States, is currently seeking input to develop Program Guidelines for the National Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program (National RRAMP).

Furthermore, RRAMP Pilot Programs will be implemented to test innovative solutions aimed at increasing mobile telecommunications coverage on regional highways and major roads within their jurisdiction. These Pilot Programs should enable each state and territory to customize solutions to meet their specific needs and priorities.

SEATS advocates for funding of a Pilot Program for a project, to be undertaken collaboratively by NSW & Victorian government agencies, which aims to find a connectivity solution in the cross-border area focusing on the Princes and Monaro Highway corridors in south eastern Australia. This region presents challenging geography and is frequently affected by natural disasters, where solutions are sourced from neighbouring jurisdictions.

SEATS further advocates that the technological solution should be broader than mobile towers and should in fact utilise other technologies such as satellites or systems like “starlink”.

SEATS has resolved to contribute to this stakeholder consultation and believes its position across southeastern Australia provides a comprehensive perspective on freight logistic chains and transport network connectivity.

SEATS also seeks to be an active stakeholder in this process moving forward.

SEATS suggests that a form of assistance for haulage operators that regularly operate within the current telecommunications shadow or more precisely blackout areas, may be to develop a solution of hardware and software to be incorporated into the cabin of prime movers which provide intermittent batches of data to be transmitted back to base.

SEATS Contribution

SEATS in its 2023 submission to the HoR Inquiry into Impacts of Severe Weather Events on Road Networks recommended:

- *That SEATS strongly requests that the governments of NSW and Victoria combine with the Australian government to roll out as a matter of urgency those elements of improvement within the local government areas of Shoalhaven, Eurobodalla, Bega Valley and East Gippsland that can be planned, designed and delivered over the next 5 years to be packaged up into a “Princes Highway Resilience Program” to deliver a highway network that will provide safer connectivity for the communities in this part of Australia in all weather and environmental conditions*

NOTE: *this is now being delivered at various localities between Wollongong and Port Augusta, by developed National and State government partnerships*

- *That SEATS strongly requests the Australian government ensure that within 5 years all national and state highways achieve a 95% mobile telephony reception coverage and that the rollout commence on the Monaro Highway and the Princes Highway between Sydney and Melbourne*
- *That SEATS strongly urges the various road, electricity supply and telecommunication agencies to provide easement buffers around all assets to*

provide continuity of the availability of assets to regional communities in all weather and environmental conditions. Governments and their agencies should review and amend policies that impinge on this outcome being achieved.

NOTE: In Victoria's east Gippsland there are areas along the Princes Highway that have been cleared across a number of utility uses – road, power, gas



SEATS also made comment in the same submission that

The Evolving Freight Task

The use of the higher productivity vehicles is clearly the way of the future to allow industry to improve freight productivity. This agenda is being driven by the Australian Government and the haulage industry.

Herein lies the dilemma! Three considerations are mentioned below.

A major issue is that to design and construct a road fit for purpose for these vehicles, the mountain passes that we have today would probably not be built in their current form or location. This legacy is now working against the nation and maintenance agencies as the knowledge about the continual day to day use and the extreme weather events are creating circumstances that cannot satisfy today's demanding requirements.

Another issue is management of driver fatigue which is driving the provision of HV Rest Areas as an essential safety feature for long and medium haul routes. SEATS strongly agrees that provision of HV Rest Areas is inadequate on the Kings, Monaro and Princes Highways in this regard. Further, HV Rest Areas need to be considered available for HVs travelling in either direction with safe ingress and egress points.

The issues of first/last mile access is more than suiting the environment and planning guidelines. Buffers which allow expansion of the access corridor to allow the movement of higher productivity HVs, queuing lanes at intersections etc need to be allowed when these corridors are planned and built. A 20m wide easement will not cut it for an industrial intersection!

There are certain requirements regarding communications that run in parallel:

- ✓ The highway corridors often traverse difficult terrain, are remote from settlements, and are located in mountainous areas. These areas are challenging for “line of sight” electronic services. Relocating or better engineering the road corridor is a consideration for future developments. Providing data connectivity, rather than telephony, would significantly improve freight management and driver fatigue and safety monitoring.
- ✓ Driver Fatigue Management is an emerging workplace health and safety (WH&S) issue in the freight industry. Besides Heavy Vehicle Rest Areas, capturing and transferring data intermittently will support new software packages installed in truck cabins to manage driver fatigue. When heavy vehicles are not trackable for several hours, it reduces the effectiveness of such safety advancements.
- ✓ Connectivity at key locations, such as Cann River, offers known data collection and transfer points; however, if these points are hours apart, they are less efficient compared to those on highways like the Hume Highway and Newell Highway Corridors.

SEATS acknowledges that while state responsibilities vary, workplace safety remains crucial. Heavy vehicles on remote routes lack effective contact and monitoring solutions. Employers require improved WH&S solutions to track the location and status of vehicles as part of the driver's workplace.

The “Community in Transit” represented by the Freight Task (estimated)

There appears to be little or no data with regard to the numbers of vehicles, nor the proportion of HVs within the mix on a daily basis. Based on what data is available, it is estimated that the daily flows are as shown in the table below:

Data supplied by	Princes Hwy	Princes Highway	Monaro Highway
Vic DoTransport	West of Cann River	East of Cann River	North of Cann River
No of Vehicles/day (% HV)	Eastward – 890 (11%) Westward – 869 (18%)	Eastward – 537 (26%) Westward – 642 (14%)	Southward – 215 (42%) Northward – 225 (42%)
Data supplied by	Princes Hwy	Princes Hwy	Monaro Hwy
Transport for NSW	Between Imlay Rd & Border	Between Cobargo & Bega	South of Bombala (nth of Imlay Rd)
No of Vehicles/day (% HV)	Total = 1420 (22.5%)	Total = 3200 (15%)	Total = 929 (21.1%)

Additional General Comments for submission:

Climate Change

The coastal aspects of the Great Dividing Range on the south east coast of Australia are playing a part in the effects of Climate Change. This is particularly evident on the South Coast of NSW and Victoria's Gippsland and the interplay with the East Coast Low weather patterns. The incidence of road closures is increasing due to flooding (and land slippages).



(Source: Illawarra Mercury, Karleen Minney)

2022 was an exceptional year for intense storms and the consequences. Apart from extinguishing the Black Summer Bushfires that started in 2020 that ravaged north Gippsland and south east NSW, the damage and devastation left on major, and minor, roads that crossed the Great Dividing Range are still being repaired in 2024 & 2025 with several years yet to resolve those land slippages. Most mountain passes fall into this category and repeat incidences are most likely, disrupting freight and commercial activities.

East Coast Lows (ECL) are intense “low” pressure systems which occur, on average, several times each year off the eastern coast of Australia, in particular southern Queensland, NSW and eastern Victoria.

These ECLs have brought about a new dimension to the escarpment issue. At some points during 2022 closures and restrictions on the various mountain passes placed imposts on hauliers and industry, including tradesmen.

Strategically, this submission has concentrated on freight movement around major freight generators that are seeking to utilise the most productive and efficient modes of transport to move raw, semi-processed and finished goods around the state, nation and globe.

This freight supply chain has a different dynamic from distribution warehouses to the point of sale. The localised logistic task for this part of the supply chain are more pragmatic in meeting delivery schedules over shorter haulage distances. The vehicles used are more suited to the delivery or receipt dockages and local road conditions.

As industry and distribution forwarders want to move to more productive vehicles, road assets dictate otherwise to find suitable solutions.

Telephony & data transfer

With modern steps forward in the integration of technology and monitoring of freight and driver safety in HVs, SEATS believes that data and telemetric services need to be provided by existing Telcos to extend their networks to cover remote areas between Bairnsdale in Vic and Ulladulla on the Princes Hwy and Queanbeyan on the Monaro Hwy.

SEATS previously resolved to *strongly requests the Australian government ensure that within 5 years all national and state highways achieve a 95% mobile telephony reception coverage and that the rollout commence on the Monaro Highway and the Princes Highway between Sydney and Melbourne*

In late 2024, the Australian Government announced funding allocations to improve telephony and data transfer along major routes as a recognition to the “community in transit” and other safety/resilience issues. Already a mobile tower is being constructed on the Monaro Highway 10km north of Cann River. Well done to whoever enabled this to happen!

By just admitting to the task being “too difficult” in some geographic areas is NOT an answer when it is believed that a solution can be found and with Government assistance rolled out to freight vehicles that operate in remote areas.

Event management causes additional tasking

The mass evacuation resulting from the Currowan Fire incident in early January 2020 caused significant delays on the Princes Highway, with a large number of travellers experiencing prolonged traffic congestion. This event was frequently referred to as a 'humanitarian crisis'. As the bushfire emergency progressed, numerous sections of the Princes Highway were closed. The influx of evacuees overwhelmed towns, leading to situations where evacuation centres



(Source: ABC News)

could only accommodate the tourist population, and residents were directed to return to their homes. Following recommendations from emergency services, evacuees carried food and fuel with them. Consequently, vulnerable towns and villages were left without essential supplies. This issue became critical when these areas, such as Mallacoota, were subsequently isolated from further supplies, leaving communities traumatized and without access to food and fuel.

Declaration of Interest

Members of SEATS actually conduct business within this area of poor mobile coverage. Much of what is elaborated upon in this submission applies to the Councils, their staff and contractors, the business community that provides goods and services.

SEATS, however, has positioned this submission on the freight industry that keeps this nation operating. This essential service which fits within the “COMMUNITY IN TRANSIT” deserves better from the telecommunications sector.

SEATS (South East Australia Transport Strategy)

<https://seats.org.au/>

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