

New England Highway bypass of Singleton

Review of Environmental Factors

Transport for NSW | December 2019



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Prepared by AECOM Australia Pty Ltd and Roads and Maritime Services

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New England Highway bypass of Singleton review of environmental factors (REF)

Executive summary

The proposal

Roads and Maritime Services (Roads and Maritime) proposes to build a New England Highway bypass of Singleton (the proposal). The proposal is located to the west of Singleton and connects the New England Highway to the north and south of Singleton. Key features of the proposal include:

- About eight kilometres of new highway (the bypass) with a single lane in each direction
- Connection with the New England Highway at the southern end of the bypass (the southern connection) including a southbound entry ramp and northbound exit ramp
- A 55 metre long bridge over the bypass at the southern connection
- A 1.7 kilometre long bridge over the Main North railway line, the Doughboy Hollow and Hunter River floodplain, Army Camp Road and Putty Road (bridge over the floodplain)
- Connection to Putty Road including a northbound entry ramp and southbound exit ramp (the Putty Road connection)
- A 40 metre long bridge over the entry ramp at the Putty Road connection
- A 100 metre long bridge over Rose Point floodway
- A 205 metre long bridge over the Hunter River
- A 40 metre long bridge over the New England Highway west of the existing Main North railway line overbridge (known as Gowrie Gates)
- Connection with the New England Highway at Gowrie Gates consisting of a southbound entry ramp and northbound exit ramp. The northbound exit ramp would connect to the New England Highway via a new roundabout intersection at Maison Dieu Road
- A 1.7 kilometre northbound climbing lane between Gowrie Gates and the northern connection
- Connection at Magpie Street including providing access to the nearby industrial area (the northern connection), consisting of a southbound entry ramp, southbound exit ramp and northbound entry ramp
- A 60 metre long bridge over the bypass at the northern connection.

Timing for construction of the proposal has not been confirmed and is subject to approval and funding availability. Construction would take around three years to complete.

Need for the proposal

The New England Highway is a major freight and commuter route forming part of the Sydney to Brisbane Corridor of the National Land Transport Network and the primary route connecting the Upper Hunter with Maitland and Newcastle. The highway currently passes through Singleton forming the main access route through town. The traffic flow along this route currently experiences delays and congestion, notably for extended morning and afternoon peak periods, with heavy vehicle movements adding further delays and congestion.

The capacity of the route will be put under further pressure as regional growth continues, with longer delays and increased traffic congestion predicted. The ability of road users to continue their journey on a bypass would reduce the volume of heavy freight vehicles and road users travelling through Singleton.

The proposal is also considered consistent with the objectives of multiple Australian and State government strategic documents including the Australian Infrastructure Plan (Infrastructure Australia, 2016) and the Future Transport Strategy 2056 (Infrastructure NSW, 2018).

Proposal objectives

The objectives of the proposal are:

- Improve travel reliability on the New England Highway through Singleton, particularly for road freight supporting the Upper Hunter and the North West New England region
- Improve the amenity of Singleton by removing freight traffic
- Improve road safety for through and local traffic in Singleton
- Support future traffic growth along the New England Highway associated with planned land use in the Upper Hunter area
- Provide access for oversize over mass vehicles along the New England Highway.

Options considered

Roads and Maritime has carried out multiple investigations to identify a preferred route for a New England Highway bypass of Singleton. The initial investigations considered multiple corridors for the bypass, with subsequent investigations considering three shortlisted route options.

Selection of the preferred option took into account social, environmental and economic factors as well as community and stakeholder feedback received during a public display period. The preferred option would achieve the most beneficial improvement to traffic flow, travel times and safety on the New England Highway through Singleton by attracting the greatest volume of traffic away from the New England Highway to the proposal.

Statutory and planning framework

The proposal is for road infrastructure facilities and is to be carried out by Roads and Maritime and can therefore be assessed under Division 5.1 of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act). Development consent from Singleton Council is not required. This review of environment factors (REF) has examined and considered all matters affecting or likely to affect the environment by reason of the proposed activity.

A strategic assessment under Roads and Maritime's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) – Strategic Assessment also applies to the proposal. This REF has been prepared to meet the requirements of the EPBC Act strategic assessment approval for Roads and Maritime activities being assessed under Division 5.1 of the EP&A Act. Therefore a referral to the Australian Department of the Environment and Energy is not required.

Community and stakeholder consultation

Consultation for development of the proposal was carried out between September 2015 and October 2015, including public display of the three shortlisted options. Further consultation activities were carried out to refine the preferred option, which was selected in December 2016, and develop the concept design and REF.

During the development of this REF, Roads and Maritime has consulted with potentially affected property owners, community members, local business owners, relevant government agencies, including Singleton Council and other stakeholders. Matters raised during consultation included impacts to property and acquisition, operational traffic impacts, flooding and construction related impacts such as noise. Comments received during consultation have been considered and addressed in the REF.

Consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders has been carried out in accordance with the Procedure for Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Consultation and Investigation (PACHCI) (Roads and Maritime Services, 2011), the OEH Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Consultation Requirements for Proponents 2010 and the requirements of Clause 60 of the National Parks and Wildlife Regulation 2009.

Roads and Maritime will continue to consult with the community and stakeholders as planning progresses. Information about the proposal is also available on the Roads and Maritime website.

Environmental impacts

The main environmental impacts and benefits of the proposal are summarised below.

Hydrology and flooding

The proposal crosses the Hunter River floodplain between the Hunter River and the southern connection, a length of approximately four kilometres. The floodplain is subject to periodic flooding during events greater than the one in five year flood (20 per cent Annual Exceedance Probability).

The proposal has been designed to achieve a one in 100 year (one per cent Annual Exceedance Probability) flood immunity on the bypass whilst minimising flooding impacts on surrounding land. The proposal would result in minor changes to the peak flood level locally around the Putty Road connection and the southern connection. The impact is localised and typically limited to rural property and the proposal area. In addition, there are reduced peak flood levels through much of Singleton and Glenridding. The proposal would provide additional flood evacuation routes and improve local accessibility during flood events up to and including a one in 20 year event.

Noise and vibration

An assessment of the potential noise and vibration impacts for the proposal was carried out for construction and the following operational scenarios, 'Do Minimum' (without the proposal) and 'Design (with the proposal) in the years 2026 and 2036.

The majority of construction works would be carried out during standard hours. The assessment identified that construction noise may exceed the criteria at a number of receivers during several construction scenarios. Pavement and earthwork activities are anticipated to cause the largest number of exceedances. These impacts would be managed through the implementation of mitigation measures including consultation with the affected community where required.

The operational noise assessment recommended that noise barriers be implemented to minimise impacts. With the six proposed noise barriers in place, 89 noise sensitive receivers are considered to be eligible for the consideration of at-receiver noise treatment.

Socio-economic issues

During construction, the proposal would result in temporary amenity impacts associated with construction activities including noise and vibration, traffic, air quality and visual impacts. The construction period has the potential to benefit the local economy through direct employment, the proposals direct expenditure as well as an increase in expenditure at local businesses by construction workers.

Once operational the proposal has the potential to impact local businesses within Singleton due to the diversion of traffic around the town. Surveys of local businesses and commuters carried out as part of investigations for the proposal identified that the overall impact to businesses is likely to be minor. The surveys identified that a large portion of highway traffic does not stop in Singleton despite travelling through. With this through traffic removed, amenity impacts in Singleton may improve due to reduced vehicle volumes in town. Singleton would remain visible from the bypass, with signage encouraging traffic to continue to stop in town to access local businesses.

The proposal would result in substantial potential benefits for freight vehicle movements. Improvements in the efficiency and reliability of these transport networks would likely result in increased productivity, reduced costs and broader economic benefits.

Biodiversity

The proposal area has been subject to a history of clearing and disturbance primarily as a result of agricultural activities. South of the Hunter River the floodplain is used extensively for cropping activities and the area to the north of the Hunter River has historically been used for grazing. The main area of native vegetation within the proposal area occurs around the northern connection where patches of native vegetation of varying quality exist.

The proposal will result in a loss of around 15.2 hectares of vegetation listed under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (BC Act). About 16.9 hectares of the Central Hunter Valley eucalypt forest and woodland, listed as critically endangered under the EPBC Act will also be impacted. This would result in a reduction of habitat, including hollow-bearing trees, for a range of birds and mammals including threatened species, and loss of fauna habitat connectivity. An aerial fauna crossing over the New England Highway would be provided to help reduce potential impacts.

An assessment of significance has been carried out for threatened species and ecological communities that are likely to occur in the proposal area. The assessment found that the proposal is unlikely to have a significant impact on all matters listed under the BC Act. It was found that the proposal is likely to have a significant impact on Central Hunter Valley eucalypt forest and woodland listed as critically endangered under the EPBC Act. Roads and Maritime's strategic assessment has been applied to the proposal.

Aboriginal heritage

The proposal is anticipated to impact 16 Aboriginal archaeological sites, with a total loss of value for 13 sites and partial loss of value for the remaining three sites. One site of cultural significance will also be impacted by the proposal, resulting in a partial loss of value. An Aboriginal heritage impact permit would be sought for the proposal.

In order to manage the impact of the proposal on the identified Aboriginal cultural heritage values of the study area, a number of recommendations have been made.

Non-Aboriginal heritage

The proposal identified a number of listed heritage items within or adjacent to the proposal area. Three locally listed heritage items would be impacted by the proposal. These are the Former Pumping Station, Bebeah and the Woolpack Inn. Direct impacts would occur to the Former Pumping Station resulting in its complete removal. Bebeah and the Woolpack Inn were identified as being directly impacted by the proposal, with works occurring within the curtilage of these two items but not directly impacting the heritage significance of the listed buildings. Measures have been identified to mitigate these impacts through the archival recording and salvaging of material where appropriate.

Justification and conclusion

The proposal is recommended as it would best address the objectives for the New England Highway bypass of Singleton. The proposal is consistent with Government strategic planning at Commonwealth, State and regional levels. While there would be some adverse impacts to the local environment and community, they have been avoided or minimised wherever possible through design and site-specific safeguards.

The proposal is justified because it would help reduce existing congestion and delays along the New England Highway in Singleton, improve access and connectivity within Singleton, improve road safety and meet future traffic needs.

Display of the review of environmental factors

This REF is on display for comment between Monday 16 December 2019 and Sunday 1 March 2020. You can access the documents in the following ways:

Internet

The documents are available as pdf files on the Roads and Maritime website at <https://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/projects/new-england-highway/singleton-bypass/index.html>

Printed copies

The documents can be viewed at the following locations:

- Singleton Council Civic Centre, 12 Queen Street, Singleton
- Singleton Library, 8-10 Queen St, Singleton.

Copies by request

Printed and electronic copies are available by contacting Joel Rosendahl on 1800 991 254, noting that there may be a charge for hard copies, CD or USB.

Staffed displays

Community information sessions will be held at Quest Hotel Singleton at 5-7 Civic Ave, Singleton at the following times. A formal presentation will not be given so please drop in at any time:

- Thursday 30 January 2020, 10.30am to 1.30pm
- Thursday 30 January 2020, 4pm to 7pm
- Thursday 6 February 2020, 10.30am to 1.30pm
- Thursday 6 February 2020, 4pm to 7pm
- Thursday 11 February 2020, 10.30am to 1.30pm
- Thursday 11 February 2020, 4pm to 7pm

How can I make a submission?

To make a submission about this proposal, please send your written comments to:

Roads and Maritime Services

Writing: Joel Rosendahl
Locked Bag 2030
Newcastle 2300

Email: singleton.bypass@rms.nsw.gov.au

Submissions must be received by 5pm Sunday 1 March 2020. Submissions will be managed in accordance with the Roads and Maritime Services Privacy Statement which can be found here <https://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/about/access-to-information/my-privacy.html> or by contacting privacy@rms.nsw.gov.au for a copy.

What happens next?

Roads and Maritime will collate and consider the submissions received during public display of the REF.

After this consideration, Roads and Maritime will determine whether or not the proposal should proceed as proposed and will inform the community and stakeholders of this decision.

If the proposal is determined to proceed, Roads and Maritime will continue to consult with the community and stakeholders prior to and during construction.

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