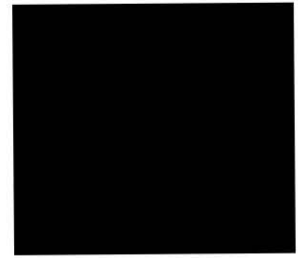


Submission 6

Mr. Neil BRUCE



The Transport, Housing and

Local Government Committee.

Rail Freight use by the agriculture and livestock industries inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the use of rail for agriculture and livestock purposes.

Since the split up and sale of QR I have noted that QRN/Aurizon have deliberately gone out of their way to discourage any rail based business other than the transportation of coal. The general freight business and grain businesses are suffering and should never have been sold with the coal business. Worse still QRN/ Aurizon have a policy of scrapping wagons and locomotives or selling them to overseas buyers. This prevents anyone wanting to become a small rail operator from low cost entry into the rail industry but ensures that QRN/Aurizon have no competition for "train paths" for their coal trains.

I could go on at length about the split up of QR and would be very happy to talk to you about it, but this is not the purpose of the inquiry. However it does need to be stressed that we are now dealing with the adverse consequences of this sale. Those responsible were either completely and utterly incompetent, or directed to willfully destroy the haulage of general freight and grain. Either way there should be an inquiry.

From my perspective the high cost of entry into the rail industry as a small private operator is the biggest hurdle. It would be great if the government could start proceedings and provide a pool of suitable wagons and locomotives for hire and some form of assistance with insurance and rail access. This should only be short term assistance to enable viable businesses to form and thence purchase their own equipment. A great model to emulate would be the American "short line" operator and the inquiry should look closely at this mode.

For example a number of retired railway men and myself considered starting a company to target the grain on the Darling Downs of which a lot is now going by road and these trucks are loading at silos served by rail! We chose the name "Darling Downs and Western" and the plan was to provide the type of service that Aurizon was not prepared to do. That is, provide less than a full train of wagons at silos for loading and then bring them into either Toowoomba or Warwick to make up a full train for Aurizon or any other main line accredited operator (if there was one) to haul to the port. In the end we could not afford the start up costs, insurance etc. and rollingstock.

We are still of the opinion that we could make it work for grain, cotton, cattle and agricultural products. Small private firms do not carry the overheads of big companies and will accept much lower profit margins. In our case we would have been happy to pay our way cost wise and some wages to ensure that rail stayed in the market. These commodities are seasonal and would work well with a small operator and retired rail workers who would like to work part time. Trains and crews can be run as required. Furthermore if we confined ourselves to secondary lines/branchlines there would be no issues with blocking the line and delaying other operator' trains if some sort of locomotive failure occurred. Rail access fees for these lines would be more affordable too.

Keeping the remaining branch lines open rather than closing them and then pulling them up needs to be a priority. I would like to suggest that all sleeper replacements should be done with steel sleepers many of which are now coming off the main lines as concrete sleepers are being inserted. Steel sleepers may not be the greatest on main lines but for low speed branches they are the best choice. Their main advantages are they don't catch fire, they don't rot and can't be eaten by termites which removes most of the ongoing cost of track maintenance other than that of timber bridges.

Finally small operators can provide the personal service that the agricultural and grazing industries need, even country passenger rail services. Perhaps it's time for this sector to start a rail co-op and I am certain that ex rail workers as well as others in rural communities would jump at the chance for seasonal work.

I would love to be on any committee with respect to this inquiry if that were possible.



Neil BRUCE