



TRANSPORT AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr SR King MP—Chair
Mr LL Millar MP
Mr BW Head MP
Mr JR Martin MP
Mr SJ Minnikin MP
Mr LA Walker MP

Staff present:

Dr J Rutherford—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—PUBLIC WORKS INQUIRY INTO THE STATE CONTROLLED ROADS BETWEEN BIRDSVILLE AND BEDOURIE AND FROM BIRDSVILLE TO WINDORAH

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 16 August 2023

Birdsville

WEDNESDAY, 16 AUGUST 2023

The committee met at 3.33 pm.

CHAIR: Good afternoon. I now declare open this public hearing for the committee's public works inquiry into state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and Birdsville and Windorah. Thank you all for your interest and attendance here today. On behalf of the committee, thanks for your hospitality. It has been awesome so far, and I know that will continue. I start by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. I acknowledge any representatives that may be here today from the Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation, Wangkangurru Yarluyandi Aboriginal Corporation and Mulligan River Aboriginal Corporation.

My name is Shane King. I am the member for Kurwongbah and chair of the committee. Other committee members with me here today are: Lachlan Millar MP, member for Gregory, who is our deputy chair; Bryson Head MP, member for Callide; James Martin MP, member for Stretton; Les Walker MP, member for Mundingburra; and Steve Minnikin MP, member for Chatsworth and the shadow minister for customer service and shadow minister for transport and main roads, who is substituting for the member for Toowoomba North. On 22 May 2023 the Transport and Resources Committee resolved to conduct a public works inquiry into state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah. The purpose of today's hearing here in Birdsville is to assist the committee with its consideration of this inquiry.

The committee's proceedings are proceedings of the Queensland parliament and are subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. The committee will not require evidence to be given under oath, but I do remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. You should have previously been provided with a copy of instructions to witnesses, so we will take those as being read. The proceedings are also being recorded by Hansard. Media may be present and will be subject to the chair's direction at all times. All those present today should note that it is possible you might be filmed or photographed during the proceedings by media and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages.

I ask that responses to questions taken on notice today be provided to the committee by 4 pm on Thursday, 31 August 2023. Today this public hearing will hear from the following witnesses: Diamantina Shire Council representatives, Dalene Wray from OBE Organic, Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation representatives, Donnie Rayment, Tony Schutt, Birdsville Race Club and, if time permits, any other person who is present who may wish to address the committee along the lines of what we are here to talk about. We may also get someone on the line from the Big Red Bash.

BOURNE, Mr Stuart, Consulting Civil Engineer, Diamantina Shire Council

DARE, Mr Robert, Mayor, Diamantina Shire Council

MURRAY, Mr Francis, Deputy Mayor, Diamantina Shire Council

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives from the Diamantina Shire Council. I invite you to make a short opening statement, after which we will be sure to have some questions for you.

Mr Dare: Thanks for bringing this inquiry to the Diamantina shire, specifically to Birdsville, as both the roads under the inquiry come to Birdsville—Windorah-Birdsville and Bedourie-Birdsville. To my knowledge, this is the first inquiry that has been held here. Initially I was worried. I was wondering why we were having an inquiry. I thought, 'We're battling for money now. Don't come out and make it worse.'

Mr MILLAR: No, that is not the intent, no.

Mr Dare: But after speaking to everybody, all of the intentions are good and thanks very much for coming out and having this inquiry here.

CHAIR: We will go to questions, and I will turn to the member for Gregory to lead the questions.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr MILLAR: Thank you for allowing us to come out here and have this inquiry. It is very important. Roads are the wealth arteries for our economy. That is how I see them. It is getting our product from paddock to abattoir or to port. Robbie, what are some of the things that we need to address on these two critical roads? We have 15 kays left from Birdsville to Bedourie and we have quite a few kays left on Birdsville to Windorah. Let us start with obviously Birdsville to Windorah. What do we need? More passing lanes? We have some passing lanes there, but how can we improve that?

Mr Dare: We need the whole road bitumened in time. We need a plan in the short term. I think safety is paramount, because we have 129 kay in Diamantina and about 70 in Barcoo. A lot of untrained, inexperienced tourists that come out here just cannot handle the roads. They do not know how to pass a road train or even another vehicle of any length, so it is unsafe to an untrained person. It is all right for us bushies. We seem to get along okay, but we need a plan. The funding at the moment has been ad hoc—it is as some government department finds extra money—but we need something we can rely on and plan ourselves for water and gravel crushing to make the whole lot safe, but, yes, safe passing lanes in the short term would be great.

Mr MILLAR: Without putting words into your mouth, we went across a couple of those lanes today going to Betoota and up to Deons Lookout. They are five kays long. They are probably, what, eight metres wide? Are we looking to probably look at making them 10 kays long and probably 10 metres wide and can you explain why we need that?

Mr Dare: We definitely need them longer. The longer the better. When road trains are travelling from this corner carting cattle out, it is not one road train; it is always two, three, up to five maybe. Getting around one truck is hard enough. The best passing lane would be a 180-kay one that goes right to Barcoo, but we understand money is not that easy to get. We need definitely 10 kay, because you need a kay or two to catch them up. You are sitting back in the dust. By the time you catch them you have to get around them, and then there is another one. Unless they are every 25 kay, you have not got long to wait, but at the moment they are not every 50 kay. There are bits of bitumen there, but they are not overtaking lanes. They are just—

Mr MILLAR: Over sandhills.

Mr Dare:—safety things over sandhills and mainly for maintenance.

Mr MILLAR: I guess for the committee's sake, what Robbie is trying to explain is that if you are in a caravan and you are behind a couple of road trains you are probably two kays off the bitumen when that road train gets on the bitumen. You are carrying a bit of weight with your LandCruiser and your caravan, so by the time you try and round that road train up it can be too late or can get into a dangerous situation where they are rushing to try and get around it. Thanks, Chair. That is my question.

CHAIR: I just wanted to add to that as well. They should be 10 kilometres from a safety perspective—and we all agree that road safety is of paramount importance, and we have seen that this morning. Once again, thanks for your hospitality in showing us so we can really see it and feel it. It should be 10 kilometres rather than five kilometres. I think we all witnessed that what you are saying is exactly right. I have another question along those lines, though, for the sealed sections. For the flying doctor to land, the width of the road in some spots did not look wide enough for a plane to turn around. I am not aeronautical, but could you explain, please, Stuart?

Mr Bourne: Yes. There is only one spot on that road in the Diamantina shire that has been set up for the RFDS to land and there are turning nodes at either end for that plane to turn around—where the numbers are and the bars. That was constructed some years ago, and it was suitable for the RFDS aircraft at the time which are the smaller PC-12 models. They would not be able to land some of the larger aircraft that are in the fleet now on that particular spot, so they would need to make sure that they had the appropriate plane for that strip in terms of width. Certainly the RFDS were consulted in terms of that process of designing and constructing that particular landing area.

CHAIR: Within the scope of this we are looking at what is there now and potential learnings so that when the state builds more we can see what we can do to make it better. That is basically why we are here. So a certain width or more would be ideal?

Mr Bourne: Yes. If you were going to do that project again these days, the RFDS are requesting a minimum of 16 metres wide. It is only 10 metres wide at the moment. The length would need to be at least 1,400 metres long, so we are talking wider and longer. The RFDS have a lot of requirements in terms of obstacles that might be in the road as well in terms of signage and guide posts. Obviously that is a consideration as well. Particularly when we are looking at locations that

might be suitable to put a landing area, we need to be conscious of the terrain, trees, hills and that sort of thing as well, so there would be a fair process that would go into doing something like that if you were going to build that again today.

CHAIR: I have a few technical questions while Stuart is here. Yesterday we saw the causeway that used to be the road before the bridge was built, and it is certainly in a state of disrepair. A few things were presented to us, including that it would be a great spot for foot traffic during the races. If it was repaired, could it be used for foot traffic and also emergency vehicles if something happened to the bridge? There would need to be light vehicle access across it. From a safety perspective, could it be used as part of the road still in that case for those festivals and emergency times? Is that feasible as an engineer?

Mr Bourne: Absolutely it is feasible. There are a couple of competing factors with that particular causeway. There is obviously the heritage nature. It is not formally listed as having heritage nature but it does. It has the stone pitching and the traditional look of it, and I think it is important to recognise that and people want to go there and actually look at what an old crossing looked like. On the other hand, it is a purple waterway because it is the main channel of the Diamantina River, which means there are fish passage concerns that relate to that as well. That is the balancing nature of trying to fix up this crossing which is making it somewhat challenging to navigate these regulatory hurdles while also keeping something there for people to look at in terms of the tradition of the structure.

CHAIR: It is not part of the state controlled network but it is something that we need to look at for the safety of the big events that you bring to the area. That is something we need to address. We talked today in the car about the 16 kilometres that is still not bitumen and the challenges that presents if you were to raise that up with water flow across to properties. From an engineering perspective, if you were to bitumen that and raise it up a certain amount, that could cause overflow of the water to stop. The cost of piers would be phenomenal, but are there engineering solutions to address that?

Mr Bourne: This is a really good example. It is an age-old question. Again, it is a bit of a balancing act. On the one hand, we would like to have a nice resilient structure that is accessible during wet weather events. Traditionally, that would mean raising it up. However, it is in the middle of a massive flood plain and we have to be conscious that that water is life. It is very important for downstream businesses. They really do rely on that water flow to come down to fill up all of their waterholes, to grow feed for their cattle. By simply raising the structures and creating big embankments, we will not only be holding the water back but affecting downstream properties as well. The solution is trying to maintain the level that it is at now to allow the water to flow over the top of it but also make it resilient enough so that, when the water goes down or it gets to a certain level, we can access it without having to spend months undertaking repairs.

Mr Dare: I think the long-term plan for that is not to make it flood-proof but just rainproof. The road is dead level with the outside terrain. We are not trying to make it flood-proof—just after so much rain you can still get through there, so there is a bypass that can be used through floods. As Stu said, keep it down and do not hold that water up.

Mr MINNIKIN: Obviously the two main ingredients to create good bitumen road base are water supply and CBR aggregate gravel. In relation to gravel, wherever I visit different parts of Queensland it seems to be that getting access to good gravel is becoming an increasingly difficult problem. How does that affect Diamantina shire? Is it a similar problem here—that is, access to gravel which will keep the cost lineally per kilometre down to a buildable rate?

Mr Dare: It is an issue. Under the futures act, the way it is read, we are the only state in Australia that has this problem with the futures act, and where these gravel pits have been we have been stopped from using them. We hope that gets resolved, but it will definitely make a massive difference to the costing. I am only working off the top of my head but, depending on where the section is, it would mean a 20 to 50 per cent increase on the road. As you might have heard Stu say this morning, a kilometre road is about \$500,000. About \$160,000 of that is fixed through the price of the screenings and the tar so we are working with \$340,000 a kilometre. Depending on where the section is, if you take the water out and just stick with gravel alone, that could go up \$100,000 a kilometre to \$150,000 a kilometre. It is a real issue. I know they are working on it, but we would like it resolved as quick as we could because we want crushed gravel. It is the only way to build roads to get quality roads. There are pits there we cannot utilise at the moment.

Mr MINNIKIN: How far off the road shoulder can you go? Is it about 30 metres or 40 metres?

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr Dare: It is 30 metres from the centre line.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about the effects you have seen in the town in Birdsville after the work that has been done on the Birdsville to Bedourie road. Has there been any increase in services that you have had to provide—in rubbish, undesirable characters, that sort of thing?

Mr Dare: I will not get into undesirable characters! Times are changing. This country was built on the cattle industry. If you go back 40 to 50 years, you very rarely saw a tourist. Now tourism is competing with the cattle industry in a good way to bring more business and try and grow our communities. The big events do put pressure on our infrastructure, like the Big Red, the Birdsville Races and the Bedourie camel races. It is mainly the toilets and showers, with people utilising the facility for a short period. We do want them to have a shower; we do not want those undesirables getting around here without a shower! The Birdsville Race Club has come up with a good idea where they are giving a few dollars per head back to the council to try to compensate for some of these extra expenses. I think it is something in the future to come from the Bedourie camels and maybe the Big Bash, with a few dollars per head to help the council build this infrastructure—more septic capacity and shower capacity—so it is not such a burden on the ratepayer.

Mr MARTIN: It stands to reason that if this 15 or 16 kilometres is sealed you will have a big difference in the type of visitor. You will have people turning up in their Toyota Corolla or whatever it might be. Has the council thought about what that might mean for the council?

Mr Dare: That is possibly a risk. On the upside of that is the locals who live here. Not everyone is a millionaire and can buy a four-wheel drive. We would like people to be able to buy a conventional vehicle and drive to wherever they want and not put all their money into an expensive vehicle—high registration, high fuel costs. If they can buy a second-hand conventional vehicle in good condition and be able to drive out on a bitumen road, that benefit would outweigh the risk of undesirables coming into our town.

Mr HEAD: Thanks for having us and thanks for being here. Have there been any issues conducting roadworks with tourists coming through who might not understand how to travel without significant lane and traffic control which they might be used to in metropolitan areas? Has that been a problem, and what might council do to avoid that or reduce that risk?

Mr Murray: I have been a roadworker most of my life so I have been out there with the tourists coming through. I must say that 99 per cent of them are great. It is just the one per cent, no matter where you are, who will ignore the speed signs or detours. On the whole it is not a problem in terms of law-breaking, if that is what you mean. Is that what you mean?

Mr HEAD: Just being a hazard generally. I am thinking for the scope of this inquiry about what works have been done and what could be done better and whether there have been safety concerns in the past or anything like that which is worth noting.

Mr Murray: We do get a lot of motorbike traffic. In roadworks when you are working with water and clay, there have been safety aspects with that which we have had in the past with our detours that you have to be careful of. Generally, it has been okay.

Mr HEAD: Do you try to plan your roadworks around those big events—like the Birdsville Races—so you are not having crews out in those times?

Mr Murray: Yes. We try to have the roads prepared before the events. I know that Main Roads has given the shire money for dust suppression during these events, if it has not rained like it has in the last few years. Council would water the left-hand side of the road coming in before the event to settle the dust and make it a much safer place for everyone. Then while the event is on they would water the left-hand side going out so you get a lot of our 90 kilometres of dirt watered. There are some plans that we have put in place to try to make it as safe as we can.

Mr WALKER: Thank you for your hospitality over the last 48 hours. It has been good and we have another big day tomorrow. We had some great discussions on the road today with some great ideas and things that you have been doing. As a former deputy mayor and working in Townsville City Council, I mentioned to the mayor about doing the road base with, say, cement stabilisation as an early stage and then you can come back later. Has that methodology been looked at where you do your prep work, like we have seen today, and put the cement base in so you have that base, and then you come back later when you have the funding to do that first and second coat of seal?

Mr Bourne: When we are doing our pavement prep, as you have seen today—there was not actually any cement in that. That was just water and the gravel to prepare the surface. We do put cement stabilisation in for floodways and then they are sealed soon after that. The risk that we would run if we did do cement stabilisation and leave that open for traffic for a long period of time is that we

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

would get quite a few undulations in that, and then you cannot really rework it once you have cement in there because it is set hard, which means to reprofile it you would have to actually rip it up and have another go.

Mr WALKER: The other thing we discussed today is: in Townsville we tried to get the road sealed—we had a lot of dirt roads and nearly all of them are done now—and we used a product called GATT. That is a cost-effective way because when you get your base done—and we have seen the roadworks today—you can come back shortly after, as the funding becomes available, and do a second and third coat. That gives you good dust stabilisation and a finished product that is skid resistant. Has that method or other methods ever been investigated for getting a seal in there that is really cost-effective?

Mr Bourne: I am not familiar with that particular product but I assume it is a polymer style dust suppression and seal product.

Mr WALKER: It is a bitumen-less base.

Mr Bourne: I am not familiar with that exact product, but we have had discussions with Main Roads about this style of product and those products have not really featured in their designs for any of the finished sealed products.

Mr WALKER: Just for the record, I do not promote any particular company's products. I note online that there is one company that promotes that GATT product and there may be others that do similar. I want to make it very clear that I have no shares in that company.

CHAIR: I have another question along the lines of doing the road. Earlier we talked about costs per kilometre. When you are set up and you are rolling with it—you have the batch plant and everything there—surely it is cheaper to keep going rather than remobilise and start again every time. I just want to get your views on that for the record, please.

Mr Dare: We can guarantee: if you can keep the money up to us, we will keep rolling along.

CHAIR: It does save money? It is dearer to do it piecemeal?

Mr Dare: Yes, it is—mobilisation of setting up camps and pulling them down. That is why we need a plan. We can get some more dams in place so the water cartage is shorter and then we get our gravel and that all tested ready to go. We could even look at shallow bores to make it cheaper, but planning will save a lot of money. You could probably knock 12 to 15 per cent off.

Mr HEAD: Do you want to explain, because of the distances, what you actually have to bring in to do roadworks, especially when you are getting further away from town? You mentioned camps. Do you want to run through the equipment that needs to be mobilised?

Mr Dare: We are pretty self-sufficient. The shire has been the major contractor for years and years and they are set up with all of the necessary equipment. The stabiliser in particular does a much better quality job and the council own their own. Everything else is there. The gravel and the water are all onsite. It is just a matter of managing the design initially, the funding—the most important part—and then doing it at the right time of the year. If you can stay away from the hot weather, when there is a lot of evaporation—you run your water out and before you get back it is drying out—and do it in the cooler time of the year, you will get a lot more bang for your buck.

Mr HEAD: City councils or metro smaller councils do not have to take a work camp out and set that up for the crews. What is involved even with that in itself? What do you bring out?

Mr Dare: We have mobilised sleeping cabins with their own showers and kitchen all on big trailers, generators, and blackwater and greywater tanks. It has all been purchased with this type of work in mind. I could not put a figure on how much it would cost, but you have your daily rates of taking things out plus the cost of the plant to take it out, so it would run into tens of thousands of dollars.

Mr HEAD: Each time you move it there is more wear and tear, which ultimately will cost more?

Mr Dare: Yes.

Mr HEAD: So if we keep roads rolling, there is less wear and tear and fewer costs at the end of the day?

Mr Dare: Definitely. I like Shane's idea: start and just keep going and it will be cost-effective.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr MINNIKIN: I refer to the Diamantina Shire Council's submission under 'Liveability'. It states—

Completion of the upgrade works on these roads will have the following benefits for residents in the communities:

...

- d. Provide access to non-emergent/specialist, medical services in Mt Isa or Longreach

Could you just talk through that point a bit more?

Mr Dare: Longreach in particular is a hard place to get to if you are not in a vehicle. There are no regular flights of any description to get to Longreach. Longreach is a service centre for our health for Bedourie and also parts of Birdsville, and Charleville is also a service provider for Birdsville. If you want to get to Longreach, you have to drive. It would be the most economical way. If the road is not sealed, you do not need much rain to close it—especially under the laws today. You blokes know all about the department of transport rule that if there is 300 millilitres of water then they close the road. It does not matter if it is emergent or non-emergent; it is critical that you can drive out of here. Mount Isa is a bit different, but that would be put in there for other reasons. If you want to go to the bank or see a doctor, you have to be able to go when your appointment is made and not rely on the regular public transport. It is just critical.

Mr MINNIKIN: There is a need beyond economics as well.

Mr Dare: It is a basic necessity.

Mr MARTIN: In relation to your submission, I was interested in the part where you say the road is only open 10 per cent of the time with no restrictions. What does that mean in particular? How many days would the road be completely impassable—or is it only that four-wheel drives can get through at certain times? Is there a time of year or an average of days?

Mr Dare: Could you repeat that first part?

Mr MARTIN: It was in relation to your submission where you talk about connectivity and how many days of the year the road is accessible.

Mr Bourne: This was in relation to the Bedourie-Birdsville road. As of the date of writing the submission, that particular road had only been open for 10 per cent of the time since the start of the year under no restrictions. There were restrictions put in place such as high-clearance four-wheel drives only, which means we cannot put trucks on that road. We are really restricted in the types of vehicles that can access it. That is what we are getting at in that point.

Mr MARTIN: A previous inquiry this committee did was on the Peninsula Developmental Road. Every wet season there are times when communities are completely cut off. I guess that is what I am getting at. Is there a time when Birdsville is completely cut off?

Mr Bourne: Yes, absolutely. I did not put those statistics in the submission, but certainly there are times where Birdsville is cut off. No two floods are ever the same. Often a flood will be closing different roads at different times, which means that some other roads may be opening up. It is almost like a series of sliding doors. That makes it very difficult logistically to organise deliveries.

CHAIR: And communicate that to the people who travel them.

Mr Dare: Steve, you asked me about non-emergent. I was just reminded that a good example of that is dentists and breast clinics. They will not drive over these dirt roads. It is maybe non-emergent, but it has to be done.

Mr MINNIKIN: It is still important.

Mr Dare: It is still important. It is a good example—more examples of that.

CHAIR: Are there any final questions? If any more questions come up during the course of this inquiry, are you happy if we write to you with any questions because we want to make this comprehensive?

Mr Dare: Of course.

Mr HEAD: Could you place on record any measurable reductions in freight costs thanks to sealing works that have been done? There might be a couple of examples of freight that might come from here to Mount Isa?

Mr Dare: I would have to say no on the freight costs, because it is the fuel costs that are driving the freight up. Truckies have to make a living; otherwise, we will end up with nothing. Our freight has just gone up again. If it was not bitumen, it would go up more. There has to be a benefit—there is no doubt about that—but it is just the times we are living in right now.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr HEAD: Any benefits may be hidden because of other increased costs that have come with it?

Mr Dare: They are hidden. I am talking solely about fuel, but if these roads were not bitumen we would have tyre issues, higher running costs through that and knocking your truck around, and the depreciation on your truck through the dirt and rough roads. If you want to get on to the cost of living—I know it is another subject, but this is a real issue out here. To get a two-litre bottle of milk to Bedourie now costs \$3.95 in freight before you start. We are hoping we have more opportunity for other operators to create some supply and demand—some competition—so maybe we can get cheaper freight once we get competition, but city slickers will not drive on the road with their trucks. You have to get these fellas who know dirt roads and they charge accordingly, because there are not many of them that will run out here.

Mr WALKER: I want to go back to the airstrip. Is there a need for lighting along the edge of that? It is a great big airstrip, but I did not see any lighting—solar or anything.

Mr Bourne: It would be ideal to have some solar lights along the side of that—yes, absolutely. They did do a practice run during the day, landing there. I am not aware if they have used it at night. If there was an emergency—I know they have landed on strips without lights before by using vehicles' headlights. However, certainly if there was an opportunity to put lights on it, I am sure—

Mr WALKER: The reason I raised it is that solar lighting is getting so much cheaper—LED solar. That is something that you need to target along that strip, because it is a great airstrip and you have big events with thousands of people.

CHAIR: If a plane were to land there, it would be coordinated with police and everything so there would be someone on the ground who could perhaps have lights—solar lights, LED lights, whatever lights. That would be a coordinated effort.

Mr Bourne: It would need to be coordinated. You would want to have the lights in place for expediency. You would not want them to be sitting in someone's ute and having to run them out and set them up while the plane is circling overhead. They would almost want to be fixed in place and just require turning on.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. If something comes up, are you happy for us to write to you?

Mr Bourne: Of course.

CHAIR: You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of these proceedings. Once again, thank you very much.

BROOK, Mr David, Adria Downs Pastoral Company

SCHUTT, Mr Tony, General Manager, Arrabury Pastoral Company

WRAY, Ms Dalene, Managing Director, OBE Organic

CHAIR: We did receive written submissions from OBE and Arrabury Pastoral Company. Mr Brook, would you like to give an opening statement?

Mr D Brook: Thank you all for coming and listening to the issues. This reminds me of a time back in the late 1960s. I joined this shire council in about 1968 or 1969. At the time there were gatherings just like this where the locals were petitioning for bitumen roads: one from Boulia to Dajarra for the cattle trains to take the cattle to the train and another from Windorah to Quilpie, again, to take road trains through. People were saying that we need bitumen roads. We met like this with all the people through the area. The only difference is that in those days I remember we had a federal member, Jim Corbett, who came along as well and I think the money ended up coming from him or from the feds. The result was that the bitumen roads, which were called beef roads and there was a specialist team, were extended from Quilpie to 100 miles west of Windorah and from Boulia to Dajarra. It serviced the trucks and it also serviced everybody else for the sake of the exercise. Robbie there would know about it. He spent a lot of time helping to build that road west of Windorah. In a way, we are having a crack at the same thing again but a bit further out because, in those days, there was no real consideration to going much further. Bedourie and Birdsville were only small places with very small populations. There was relatively no tourism, as Robbie has said. It was maybe 100 people in each town with small cars. There were really not any four-wheel drives using the roads and we were still complaining then that the trucks bugged them up but, anyway, that's an aside.

Now we are basically saying: those same roads, extend them more. The road from Boulia down has been pretty much done, but this other one has not been done. Now we are saying we need them not only for the trucks. The game is different. There are thousands and thousands of people coming. Instead of being light touring cars, SUVs weigh twice as much and they have a caravan behind so there is about eight sets of wheels on the road and there are tens of thousands of them in a year. I think that really explains why we would be asking for support. From my point of view, I have a foot in both camps with tourism and cattle—the land I am talking about and the value of some of the cattle issues. That is the story. The community will benefit. Regular services from a regular road I think is what we need.

I know there is a lot of detail in some of the other submissions from the Big Red Bash and the Race Club so I will not go into all the little cash extras. I think it is pretty easy to see that that had been done 55 years ago and we got that far but nothing has happened since—well, not 'nothing has happened'. Over 20 years the road has come down from Bedourie and Boulia and that is very good, but it is time to start on the other one, because there are a lot of cattle trucks on the road and it is a safety issue. I know that the bitumen roads further in and to the north have saved lives. With the roads out here, every year there are people dying. If you can tap into some police records you will find perhaps how many deaths there are and it would be surprising—and also how many accidents and rollovers that do not end in deaths but end in injuries. For me, that is the sad part. I wish you well in trying to solve it. That is all I will say.

CHAIR: Tony, is there anything that you would like to add from your perspective?

Mr Schutt: I thank you for letting us have this opportunity to put a submission forward for this inquiry. Hopefully, we can have ongoing discussions and make some ground. I will give a bit of an overview of Arrabury Pastoral Company. As you know, we own Mount Leonard and Arrabury Downs between Windorah and Birdsville. About 97 kays of the Diamantina Developmental Road runs through our property. With Cluny, at Bedourie, we have about 50 kays of the Eyre Developmental Road running through the property plus the Lake Machattie bypass road. It is about 70 kays of unsealed road, which is used when the Eyre Developmental Road is closed due to flooding. It cops a lot of traffic. I do not want to upset the shire on this, but it probably does not get the maintenance because it is not a regular road. When it does get all of that traffic, which is all of a sudden diverted around there, it gets in a very poor state very quickly. It becomes quite dangerous. Sometimes the dust just hangs in the early morning and late evening and the visibility gets down to metres. It makes driving very dangerous. That is about all.

The other thing I wanted to reiterate is: whatever development happens with our road building, we have to really be conscious of not diverting our water and river flows. You have seen our flood country. You only have to look around Birdsville when it floods out with the bird life, the flora and

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

fauna. It is such a phenomenon. We do not want that to be spoilt, but that does not come at a low cost, I know. The engineers would be able to explain it better than I, but I am sure there are ways that you can get around that.

CHAIR: Dalene, is there anything you want to say?

Ms Wray: My contribution is, I guess, from the perspective of an organic beef exporter but I am also from here. Although I now reside in Brisbane, I grew up out here. I have driven on the roads and lived and breathed them. Towns like Boulia, Bedourie and Windorah are not just gateways to the vast and magnificent cattle production region of the Channel Country; they are tourist hubs as well. The Big Red Bash, the Birdsville Races and the outback golf masters are just a handful of events that bring tens of thousands of people, instead of cattle, moving about our roads and into our production region. There is a significant surge of people moving about and spending money in the tourist season, bringing benefits to regional communities. I am not just talking about Birdsville. You might be interested to know that businesses from Goondiwindi to Quilpie and Longreach to Winton report that the week preceding the Big Red Bash is their busiest period of the year. These major events draw people to and through our wonderful state. Birdsville is a critical entry point into the state of Queensland for vehicles moving up the Birdsville and Strzelecki tracks from South Australia.

In OBE Organic's written submission to the inquiry we have highlighted the problems, along with a number of possible solutions including recommending the Queensland Palaszczuk government improve the trafficability of the existing road network through investments in bitumen. What that means to us is using our roads 24/7. Outback tourism, the resources industry and the cattle industry have outgrown the existing road infrastructure. Our road infrastructure and road maintenance programs are not growing at the same rate as the Queensland economy under the Queensland Palaszczuk government. The onerous maintenance programs to maintain these unsealed roads has outgrown the local government's ability to respond. After a maintenance grade, providing you do not get rain, the conditions of the unsealed roads would historically be better for longer. However, because there are now thousands more vehicles, they are heavier and the vehicles are towing trailers and caravans, the condition of the unsealed road surface deteriorates in weeks rather than months. Birdsville is the only iconic town in Queensland without bitumen access. Our road infrastructure, quite simply, is being left behind.

Mr King, in your maiden speech to parliament in 2015 you said, in the context of your working life, 'I want my mates to come home to their families safe every day.' This is consistent with the Department of Transport and Main Roads vision which includes in its objectives the improved safety, security and resilience of our transport network.

A livestock truck carrying a load of just 132 head of organic cattle weighs around 100 tonne. It puts a huge strain on the existing unsealed roads. Compare this with a standard SUV that weighs just 1.5 tonne. There is nowhere else in Queensland where you put the same volume of cars on dirt roads with trucks. We gave an example in our written submission stating that multiple rain events in Queensland in 2022 led to wet and closed roads. It cost our business and the Queensland economy \$3 million in export revenue for just one year. To put it simply, just 10 millimetres of rain can close the Windorah to Birdsville road. When you cannot truck cattle out of this country, you cannot get them to abattoirs near Brisbane and turn this unique resource into an export commodity to benefit the Queensland economy. In its 2022 annual report, Transport and Main Roads demonstrated that the 20-kilometre and nine-kilometre sealing projects in this area have delivered important improvements in safety, reliability and travel times for freight and agricultural industries that use this central link to access markets in major centres around Australia and the world. Let's finish it.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will now go to questions.

Mr MILLAR: I agree with everything you say. We are the economic drivers in Queensland when it comes to the economy. The roads that we have out here are wealth arteries so we have to get the economic benefits that we have in trade and the iconic brands that we have out here to those markets. I guess my first question is to all three of you; one can answer or all three can answer. Obviously we cannot seal the Birdsville to Windorah road tomorrow. However, one of the things that we can do to look at safety, including safety for the tourism industry and working alongside the cattle industry, is build more passing lanes. I spoke to council about looking at 10-kay passing lanes that are probably 10 metres wide to allow the safe passing of road trains when they are only going 60 kays an hour along dirt roads. What are your thoughts about that? Do we look at another three 10-kay passing lanes to try to make it safer?

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr D Brook: Any improvement is welcome. One of the issues with safety, going back to safety, is driver hours. Our carriers logbook their hours. On the dirt roads they have to go often quite slow when the roads are bad. Instead of doing 80 kays an hour, or whatever they normally do, they are back to 40 or 50 kays an hour so the trip is longer. They run out of hours but they have to push on because they cannot stop as there is nowhere to unload the cattle. If it was a sealed 80- or 90-kay road they could get through in their time. We have to get 660 kays to—

Mr MILLAR: For the benefit of the committee, if a truck takes off from your place, where would eight hours get them to?

Mr D Brook: I cannot say exactly. It is about a 12-hour trip into Quilpie and often they do not start here; they start another 30 or 50 or 800 kay out. It is a 12- or 13-hour run. Probably they could do it in 10 if everything goes well, but if there has been a bit of rain or there are cars on the road and they have to go slow—if they get behind caravans then they cannot get past. It is not that they are really trying to get past, but some of those cars go pretty slowly too. It is just congestion.

Mr MILLAR: So they would just get past Windorah, maybe?

Mr D Brook: To pass a caravan—they have a fright when three trailers come up. They can do anything and vice versa. A caravan may try to pass a truck thinking they will whip around it but then there is another one and then another one and then they are stuck out on the side for ages. There was a death last year. There are deaths. I do not like talking about it but it is killing people.

Mr Schutt: I appreciate that funding is an issue and it is a big cost because it is a long distance and there is a lot of infrastructure. As the mayor says, it costs a lot to lay the bitumen. I look around at the Chinchilla Solar Farm, for instance, or the Dulacca Wind Farm. They would not have come cheap and I am not sure what benefit that gives to the state. What penalties are we having here because there is a lack of funding? Let's face it: the funding has to come. With passing lanes, as everyone has said, anything is a help but I think we need to push a little bit harder and just try to produce the funding somehow.

Mr MILLAR: The opportunity for us to come out here is to put it on the agenda and emphasise that there are a couple of things that we need to do. We need to finish 15 kilometres of the Bedourie to Birdsville road. We need to focus on that. Let's get some more passing lanes on the Birdsville to Windorah road. I would love to seal it tomorrow. I am passionate about this region. It provides an economic contribution that probably not many people in the city realise. That is not their fault. The beef industry out here is a major economic contributor to our state.

Mr Schutt: This could be a five- or 10-year project. In the interim, if passing lanes are approved and put in, can more funding come to the local councils to maintain the roads more consistently? Before the Big Red Bash event or the Birdsville Races, for instance, the road is immaculate. The week after the Birdsville Races or the big bash it is totally wrecked. Then we have to wait until the next event before it is patched up.

CHAIR: Just to manage the expectation there, what we are doing is a public works inquiry into what has been done with a view to improvements that could be made when that work continues in the future—what have we got right, what have we got wrong, what could be done better. We will write a report. Everything that you said is now on the record. We appreciate that. We do not have a chequebook. We do understand. As Dalene highlighted, there is a return on investment. You illustrated the benefit to the state. That is the sort of thing that you are highlighting that I think is important.

Mr MINNIKIN: I have a question to Dalene in relation to the OBE Organic report. It was a very well structured report, so congratulations to all those involved. This is a follow-up question to a point that David has already spoken about in relation to reducing pressure on truck drivers with regard to fatigue management. Can you explore it a bit more from your company's perspective? David did touch on it. Could you speak to that a bit more, please?

Ms Wray: For the committee's interest, most cattle stations out in this part of the world are certified organic—just about all. We have some regulations in Australia around animal welfare. Because we are so far from the east coast abattoirs, most animals that are hauled from this part of the world have to rest. The animals actually have to rest, not just the truck drivers. In our case—in the OBE Organic supply chain's case—they rest in Quilpie. Interestingly as well, they have to be certified organic cattle yards and they have to be certified to US government standards. We do not have the luxury of truck drivers getting stuck, having to divert via Bedourie and then they need to manage their fatigue so they can offload the animals somewhere. We cannot do that. The animals

have to be fed certified organic hay. We cannot pick a trucking yard anywhere and offload them. These requirements are requirements of the Korean government, the Australian government and the US government.

From a human fatigue management point of view—for us it is both animal welfare and fatigue management for drivers; they are both equally important—fatigue management is complicated. It is less complicated when you are coming empty. We have probably 150 truck movements in and probably 150 truck movements out, give or take. Coming in empty, you have more choice because you do not have animals on board. Also it depends on the time of the year. You have more choice in winter than you have in summer, when it is hot. Going back out when you are full, as I said, you have requirements under federal and state legislation around fatigue management but you actually cannot stop. If you have animals on board, you do not have the luxury of just parking up for 12 hours in a rest stop to wait until you have met your fatigue management requirements and then move on.

CHAIR: Would you have two drivers in that case?

Ms Wray: Sometimes. As we know, in Queensland we do not have the luxury of labour.

CHAIR: Forgive my naivety. I did just did not know whether you would have a shift roster or something.

Mr MARTIN: You mentioned that unsealed roads require more maintenance. Birdsville obviously has a different situation to most communities, where the council use the rate base to pay for the maintenance of the roads. The situation here is that you have two big events—the Big Red Bash and the Birdsville Races—where a whole bunch of out-of-towners roll in and roll out. The mayor in his previous submission mentioned that the council does not get a slice of the ticket sales. Do you think that might be an option for contributing towards that maintenance, considering the different situation that Birdsville is in compared to another city?

Mr D Brook: For the races I think we charge a \$40 entry fee to cover prize money and the facility we provide. I think our offer to the Diamantina shire is that we collect \$8—I think it is \$8, Robbie—per head to the council. We do that more not for the roads but for the council to provide ablution facilities for the 2,000 campers. We really cannot afford that \$8. We can, but it is \$8 we cannot spend on something else. The council has suggested that we should charge people more, but with our entry cost we are probably the dearest course to get into in Queensland. There is some shade but there is not much down there. If we charged a lot, we would be hounded on social media. We do not have a lot to play with. That is probably a once-only fee that they pay—4,000 or 5,000 times \$8 does not go anywhere with roads but it does go a little bit towards the cleaners, the water supply and those who come around collecting the bins. That is about the best the race club can do.

The big bash runs its own event, pretty much. A lot of people do stay around town for a while. They go into the big bash up to two days before and they are there all the time. They run their own rubbish collection system or they pay someone to do it, so it is not such a burden on council. The road out there was a burden on council—watering it and trying to keep it safe from dust. Fortunately, the council and the government, having had it sealed under the iconic roads program, have fixed that problem.

Ms Wray: In speaking about events needing to sell tickets to then potentially give something back to local government to maintain the roads, you might be interested to know that I have heard anecdotally that ticket sales for the races this year are down. On social media people around Australia are saying they are going to wait until the last minute in case the roads are closed. So they are not buying their \$40 ticket ahead of time in case the Queensland government or the local government close the roads. That is really difficult when you are putting on events now. They have been spooked by what happened at the big bash this year and they have been spooked by what happened at the races last year. Both had major rain events which closed different parts of the Queensland road system.

Mr D Brook: I would add that the rule to close the road when there is 300 millimetres of water on the road does not really work out here. It creates a problem. If you close a road for a small amount of water, people are queued up in Windorah and Marree. Three hundred people did not come and they are all wanting refunds. It is chaotic everywhere.

Ms Wray: From a livestock movement perspective, during those big events—probably the Big Red Bash because it is bigger than the races—we have to make sure when sourcing cattle we are not having trucks bumping in at the same time as cars are coming in and we are not having trucks going out. It is quite complicated for that period to try to avoid trucks and cars being on the same road together.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr HEAD: You touched on the 300-millimetre rule. I think that is the same rule across the whole state.

Mr D Brook: Yes, that is right.

Mr HEAD: Did you want to perhaps comment on the Channel Country? As we have been learning, different weather events bring different water flows and things like that. Sometimes it is very slow moving water and 300 millimetres here is completely different to 300 millimetres in, say, the Burnett, where it might be dangerous and you would not even take a four-wheel drive through it. Would you like to place something on the record about that?

Mr D Brook: I do not have an answer or a solution. I could say 400 millimetres.

Mr Schutt: I think you are opening a can of worms there because where do you set the boundaries on that?

CHAIR: It is hard to educate people to drive safely and to not drive through floodwater. Floodwater may not be raging floodwater, but if you drive through—and we mentioned this yesterday when we were talking about the causeway—you do not know what is underneath that water.

Mr Schutt: My suggestion would be that the local authorities are allowed to make an assessment and have someone in control make an assessment.

Mr HEAD: Further, which is what I was getting to, if you have a good sealed road underneath it is going to be easier to assess than otherwise, perhaps.

Mr D Brook: Yes. I do not know what the answer is. Most of the problem occurs when there is a measuring board and someone can read it. It is a headache.

Mr MINNIKIN: You cannot legislate for common sense.

CHAIR: It is hard to walk it first when there is 10 kilometres of it.

Mr MILLAR: I want to thank you for allowing us to come today. This is important. David, you mentioned that you had this conversation back in the sixties. Please keep the faith. We are having the conversation again. We will continue to advocate. Everybody on this panel had an understanding before we got here of the importance of this region.

Mr D Brook: Thank you. I am not turning up in another 50 years.

Mr MILLAR: We will keep advocating.

CHAIR: I have to say that the member for Gregory is a constant advocate for western roads.

Mr WALKER: In relation to the comment earlier about having 300 millimetres of water and the roads are closed, would you suggest that if all the roads were sealed there would be no more road closures?

Mr D Brook: No. If you still had 300 millimetres—there is a road here just next to the bridge that has a measuring board and 300 millimetres is nothing. You could go through there with 600 millimetres but some cannot either. If they come in a low-slung car, it is not so good. This is where clearance is important.

Ms Wray: The other thing about rain events that you have to understand—you flew down from Mount Isa and you saw this beautiful Channel Country. It depends on the rain event. You can have 300 millimetres and everyone can look around and say, 'No problem here,' but if you have another 200 millimetres in four days time—which is what happened during the bash—then it starts getting complicated. You can have 300 millimetres at Bedourie two weeks before the Birdsville Races and potentially that is going to cause a problem here at the Birdsville Races because you have the Diamantina coming down and flooding. It is not really about that one rain event; it is about what is going on in the Channel Country.

Mr WALKER: Absolutely, because it is very flat country. For the record, because we know it is flat country and if you get a 300-millimetre rain event it could be over 50 or 60 kilometres of road, who is going to sign off and say, 'Go ahead'? I heard the comment, 'We'll get the local authority to make the decision.' They will say, 'We don't want to make that decision because our insurance policy won't cover all those vehicles if they disappear.'

Mr D Brook: One of the advantages of sealed roads would be that people would have the confidence to come. They would say, 'If it rains, we will still get out because the road will be open a couple of days after.' That confidence is not there quite often.

Mr WALKER: No. The central-western district is the largest in Queensland—nearly the size of Victoria. Main Roads have written a report and they talk about the road-sealing program. They work in partnership with the Outback Regional Roads and Transport Group, which has seven local councils. They work on a strategy of road sealing. Is there competition as to which local authority gets what and which local companies have input? Has your industry ever had input into that road-sealing strategy?

CHAIR: It would be the council.

Mr WALKER: No. Industry make a submission to the local authorities.

Mr D Brook: We would make a submission to the local authorities here. Robbie and his team would then meet with those other authorities. I know they have been successful. Those seven councils that are in this area—

Mr WALKER: It is a good report.

Mr D Brook:—have nominated this road as the No. 1 priority in the whole area and finishing the Bedourie road is the No. 2 priority. From a local government perspective, they are in agreement with what we are saying.

Mr WALKER: It says there is 15.7 kilometres of unsealed road remaining.

Mr HEAD: Do you want to just place on record the work that has been done, because this is talking about the work that has been done with a view looking forward? What could we have done better with the bits of sealing that have been done in the last few years?

Mr D Brook: Personally, I think they have done a mighty job with the money available—and that has always been the case with the Diamantina shire, I think, and I spent a good while on it. I think if you asked the hierarchy in Main Roads, they would probably tell you without even blinking that the Diamantina shire has got the best value for money in roadworks of any shire in Queensland. One of the reasons is that the country is dry and the roads are over good ground. Over the period that I was on the council, with others, we spent a lot of time moving the original roads—roads along the edges of the flood plains all the way to Durrie and all through there—to higher ground. We did sections of the Bedourie road. They are the two I think of mostly. They were shifted from where they were to higher ground, envisaging the day that bitumen would come, so the base of those roads is solid ground, pretty much. Unfortunately, there are some creeks to cross, but, essentially, any of these bitumen roads you will drive over that were already here are still in good condition. So the money, I would say, has been well spent—at probably half the average cost for Queensland, but I do not know about that.

Mr HEAD: Certainly from what I have seen and the figures, the bang for buck for the government has been significantly better than what I see in many other parts of the state. From a state government perspective, what should the state government have done better to help Diamantina shire and the crews on the ground to do a better job for the road users at the end of the day?

Ms Wray: For businesses that are hauling livestock out of here or fuel in or supplies in, thank goodness we have a bitumen road with only 19 kilometres to go because it does give us an option. It is better for us to go Birdsville-Windorah with our livestock, but sometimes when there are big rain events we now have an option to go via Bedourie up to Boulia and across. I gave some examples in our submission where fuel has had to come some strange way through Winton and down. We have had supplies that have had to take a circuitous route to get here. Someone had to make a tough decision whether we do less of Windorah-Birdsville, and perhaps that was a good decision.

Mr Schutt: The bituminisation that has been done has proven to be a good job, especially from here to Bedourie. Some of that bitumen now has been down 10 or 12 years or maybe longer and, correct me if I am wrong, I do not think there has been any maintenance on that bitumen because it has not needed it. That was my point before: if we do not bituminise, the ongoing maintenance to the dirt and to the unsealed roads just seems to be dead money. It is just dead money chasing bad money all the time. To answer your question, I think they have done a great job with what they have done.

Mr HEAD: Yes. Just for the sake of the record, we had been talking prior to this hearing about the 6m to 8m form widths. Should we be building eight-metre-width roads a lot more?

Mr Schutt: I am sorry, but I do not get out and measure the width of the road everywhere else, but whatever a standard two-way carriage is is sufficient. We do not want anything special. There is a stretch at the Birdsville turn-off on the Windorah road and they have just done I think a seven- or eight-kay stretch of road and three road trains could pass there together and would not touch. That to me is overkill, but that is in a different shire and that is another story.

Mr D Brook: This question came up at council some years back, and I think Robbie would know. He told me that when they analysed going from seven to eight metres it did not cost that much extra. You have all the machinery there, and eight metres adds a little bit of extra safety. None of these roads have lines down the middle. With lines down the middle you end up with two-wheel tracks and you end up with the edges all mucked up more, so what has been done I think is good and for good reason, but I would say eight metres. Spend a little bit extra and make them eight metres.

CHAIR: That was the question I was going to ask about elsewhere in the state and elsewhere in the nation in terms of the major road bodies throughout Australia. The road treatment where you have the wide centre line in the middle is saving lives—that is the research that has been done—because you have that comfort in passing a road train when there is a metre between you; there is not just the single line. That was going to be my question. If the roads are not wide enough for that, would a wider road with that road treatment help? I think you have already answered it.

Mr D Brook: You could not put a wide line down. There might not be room, and I agree that it is scary passing a road train.

CHAIR: No, the road wider to match that.

Mr D Brook: Yes. You would have to make them probably 10 metres, and that would really solve the problem.

Ms Wray: I think the important thing for the committee to remember here is that 99 per cent of the people we are talking about who are using the road are tourists—or maybe it is 90 per cent—and if there is a white line they are going to assume that if they are on the left-hand side of it they are safe. There is a great example which is outside of what we are talking about, between Windorah and Charleville, where that bitumen is not wide enough. It has a white line down it. If you have a road train coming at you, you cannot stay on the bitumen; you will get taken out by that truck if you just move to the left of the white line. You actually have to move off the road, so I think as wide as possible. We are led to believe that it is not too much more expensive to add a few metres, and if the white line saves lives that is great, but it needs to be widened—

CHAIR: No, it is the wider one, not just the white line.

Ms Wray: Yes, so we just need to make sure that a normal person can assume that if they move to the left they are not going to be taken out by someone coming in the other direction.

CHAIR: And by the same token, you do not want to give false comfort.

Mr HEAD: Do you want to talk about wear and tear on vehicles? Perhaps over the years, with the more sealing that has been done, you might have an idea of the number of tyres you go through travelling these roads a lot with huge stations?

Mr Schutt: We have been doing a lot of monitoring at Mount Leonard and Arrabury with our tyres, and we have been monitoring tyres now for 12 years. We have tried every brand that is on the market and we came up with a couple of tyres that have lasted. We can now average 22,000 kilometres out of a set of tyres on a LandCruiser ute. To put that into perspective, most other vehicles around the state would be getting between 40,000 and 60,000 kays out of their tyres and we are averaging 22,000, but that is better than it was 12 years ago when we were averaging 15,000. We have more bitumen running through our place, so that has probably helped and maybe tyre compounds are better, but that is fact and I would have data to prove that.

Mr D Brook: I want to throw something else in on tyres, because it is critical. People sometimes apply for a job out here and one of the questions is, 'Will we need a four-wheel drive?' Instead of a \$50,000 car, it is a \$100,000 car. They nearly have to have that to feel comfortable in taking the job, so that is one of the reasons we cannot get people to come out there, because it costs money. The other thing about tyres is: if the roads were bitumen, you could have a conventional car with \$120 or \$130 tyres. When something goes wrong and you have a four-wheel drive or an SUV, it is a \$400 or \$500 tyre and the stones and that blow holes in them all the time. So there are costs, and it is no wonder that we cannot get families to come out. They have big costs because of not only food but also tyres and maintenance. There is not much in your favour except it is a lovely place.

Mr WALKER: The lifestyle.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

CHAIR: If during the course of the inquiry we come up with any other questions, are you happy for us to write to you with those questions?

Mr D Brook: Yes, that is fine.

CHAIR: Thank you. We might just have a quick break now and reconvene at five.

Mr HEAD: Chair, with regard to those tyre figures, if you had those figures since you have been recording it—

Mr Schutt: It would be just a rough sketching where we make notes.

CHAIR: We have it on the record.

Mr HEAD: Yes, but if there was anything further to what you just said that you could add, that could be helpful.

Mr Schutt: Yes. If I can dig something up, yes.

Mr HEAD: If we could ask for that to be sent through, yes, if you have it on hand and can send it along.

CHAIR: Yes. It is of benefit to the committee certainly.

Ms Wray: Mr King, you might have heard the naysayers say, 'People want some roads to be dirt. Tourists want to have that experience.'

CHAIR: I have not heard that.

Ms Wray: What we understand is they have bought an expensive car and they have fitted it out. They are coming out here to drive on the dirt road, but when they blow a tyre and they have to go to the roadhouse and pay \$500 for another one or their trailer did not make it out here then they change their minds. I think there are a few people saying, 'We've got to keep some roads dirt,' but we suggest they head out into the desert.

CHAIR: I have not seen that submission. Thanks for putting the idea out there, but I had not heard that. Thank you. As I said, we will adjourn and after that we might ask if there are any traditional owners to come forward and give submissions from five. Thank you all very much once again and thank you for your hospitality.

Proceedings suspended from 4.54 pm to 5.06 pm.

McKELLAR, Mr Rodney, Cultural Adviser, Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation

ROWLANDS, Mr Don, Private capacity

CHAIR: We do appreciate you coming along. There is no need to make an opening statement if you do not want to. We can be pretty casual and just go to questions. Is there anything you would like to say?

Mr McKellar: Thanks for coming out and actually going for a drive, because you have to drive on the roads to understand what we are talking about. The pastoralists and the shire have asked you all the questions that I was going to ask. There is not a great deal I can add to that. Are you talking to federal at all?

CHAIR: No, we are state and this is about state controlled roads.

Mr McKellar: Eventually would you—

CHAIR: This report will become the property of the Queensland parliament. It will be a public document that councils, federal, pastoralists—everyone can access and use what we are doing here for future work, basically. That is what this is about.

Mr McKellar: Funding is always the problem. Whatever help you can get from federal would be helpful.

CHAIR: I did have a request for us all to speak a little louder because some people are struggling to hear. I am sorry for the acoustics of the room. We did turn the air conditioning off. I will go to questions.

Mr MILL AR: I know that you have been around here for a long time. I guess you have seen the increase in road use. Obviously with the Big Red Bash, Birdsville Races and the tourism drive, you would have seen a significant increase in road traffic over the time you have been here?

Mr McKellar: Yes, definitely.

Mr MILLAR: What we are hearing is that it is not just small cars; it is now those big SUVs and Toyota LandCruisers with big caravans et cetera. They do take their toll on the road. The more we can bitumen or the more we can seal them to make it safe and also help the local residents is probably a good thing.

Mr McKellar: The more bitumen the better. Earlier Robbie was talking about non-emergency medical treatment such as a knee replacement or a hip replacement. I know that someone in town here was on the waiting list to get their knee done. They had been waiting for four years and they finally got the call to go to Townsville the following week. She does not fly, so her husband had to drive her up there. It is a long way to go for two old people.

Mr MILLAR: Especially for our Indigenous community, and you have an elderly community here. They have to get their treatment, whether it be in Toowoomba or wherever they have to go. You would say they probably do move by vehicle rather than by plane?

Mr McKellar: They do. Some of the older people do not fly.

CHAIR: I think the point you make is very relevant—non-emergency health care. When a road is blocked and you cannot fly—point taken.

Mr MARTIN: I have a general question about money that the state government has already invested in road upgrades. Could you share with the committee your experience or opinion on how that has flowed through to the Indigenous community? Are there any Indigenous owned businesses that have contracts? Is there Indigenous employment in general?

Mr McKellar: Yes, I have a business of my own. I am a sole trader. I was contracted out to the council so it benefited me. More work would benefit many more of the Aboriginal communities around here because we can train our young people so they can stay here; they would not have to go away. They cannot be here if there is not the work for them. Even if you were to build the bitumen roads right out here you would have tourists always coming, so the roadhouses and things like that would benefit. It opens up job opportunities for our younger people to stay in this area, because too many of them are going.

CHAIR: Good point.

Mr HEAD: Can you elaborate—you sort of covered it, but it is good to get different perspectives when talking about access to health care and services generally. If we were to seal these roads, what would that mean? In talking about costs, we have been talking about how a fully sealed road would

mean a cheaper car and conventional road tyres that are a third of the price of a four-wheel drive tyre. Do you want to add to how much that might benefit this community in accessing services, both health and more broadly, and how that might look?

Mr McKellar: It is basically what every other small town that has bitumen roads to their town has: access. They have the opportunity to just go whenever they want; they do not have to wait for roads to open after a rain event or whatnot like we do because our road is dirt. They have bitumen roads. It would just be to have the same as anyone else, really.

Mr HEAD: Do you want to add to that, Don?

Mr Rowlands: What was the question again, please?

Mr HEAD: We were talking about the access if it is a bitumen road. Previously we have heard that if there is a fully bitumen road you can go there with an average sedan with road tyres rather than four-wheel drives with the more expensive tyres. What does that mean for the community in accessing services and making it more affordable? Will it mean that more people would go to a doctor for a check-up and different things like that?

Mr Rowlands: First of all, thanks for inviting us to come in and have a bit of a chat. I remember growing up here and we all had conventional cars. That was the only vehicle in the country. Then the stations started buying Land Rovers and I think that might have started the trend for four-wheel drives. Initially, we all had conventional cars because they were cheaper to buy and the fuel was 30 cents a gallon. Today it is still the same, I think. We all have four-wheel drives and then there is the insurance and fuel costs still affecting us. Only needing to have a conventional car would help a lot.

Mr MINNIKIN: Thank you so much for your time this afternoon. Rodney, I think one of your opening comments was ‘the more bitumen the better’. As we have also heard, one of the stumbling blocks to getting more lineal kilometres sealed each year with a budget is simply access to gravel and water. We talked a bit earlier about how one of the stumbling blocks sometimes is getting access to gravel which is beyond that 30-metre mark et cetera. I know it is something that this committee cannot solve; it is state legislation which needs to be looked at. I know with cultural sensitivities—and I give a big call out to the Diamantina Shire Council representatives who appeared this morning, who in every conversation were extremely respectful about the Aboriginal culture, which was great to hear and see. Is there also a desire to try to work with different groups to try to make sure that gravel can be sourced?

Mr McKellar: We do at the moment. It is always ongoing. With the gravel pits it is different departments—DAF or something.

Mr MILLAR: It is under the department of agriculture.

Mr McKellar: Yes. Aboriginal groups do not talk to the councils. DAF is the middleman. We have no say in it, really. DAF will come out. We will do the clearances or the extensions of the pits. That was the last job they did. But I cannot tell the council, ‘Yeah, you’re right to go,’ because it has to come through DAF.

Mr MILLAR: They are the middleman?

Mr McKellar: Yes, the middleman. It is out of our hands.

Mr MINNIKIN: From a traditional owner’s perspective, very supportive but stumbling blocks?

Mr Rowlands: We are supportive. I was talking to Kevin about it on the way home today, and this committee and this hearing may be able to persuade them. At the moment we are not blocking anything in terms of the gravel pits. I found out today that they were locked out. That is how much I am involved with it, but I usually am pretty well involved. It is another drama that I guess we need fixed, because I think we get some of the blame for that and it is not warranted.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. That is on the record now.

Mr McKellar: To add to that, we are progressive. We want a piece of this work. It is counterproductive for us to block it. We do not. We let things roll along.

Mr MINNIKIN: Whilst it is outside the purview of the remit of this particular committee, I think it is a very important thing that has been noted that needs to be discussed probably internally as well.

Mr McKellar: Most of the roads are already established and we do not usually do clearances unless they want a realignment or a new pit. Everything has been covered before anyway.

CHAIR: Are there any further questions?

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr HEAD: I just wanted to add to questions we have asked before and the comment ‘the more bitumen the better’. In a perfect world, what does the road both directions, east and north out of here, look like into the future?

Mr Rowlands: Bitumen.

Mr MINNIKIN: Autobahn.

Mr McKellar: And no undesirables.

Mr MILLAR: A four-lane highway.

Mr McKellar: There is a good opportunity to rope in federal. There are only 15 kays from Mount Isa to Birdsville that are not bitumen, and if South Australia get bitumen you have 1,500 kays to Adelaide. There is a national route right through the centre of Australia. Trucks are not going around; they are not coming from Adelaide up to Alice Springs and coming back around. They do try to come on the dirt roads, but you just cannot travel on them. Trucks will not travel on them because they are too rough.

CHAIR: That is a good point.

Mr Rowlands: I just want to add, after listening to the earlier statements from the witnesses: I was thinking to myself that if there are five millimetres of rain in Birdsville we all start getting worried, but where you come from five millimetres is just a little cupful on the roof. Ten millimetres gets worse; 15 gets worse. What Dalene was saying is true: a small amount of rain can bring us to a standstill and pretty much bring us to our knees. Then it is back to how we get our rations. Sometimes it has to be flown in. I just wanted to make the point that it only takes that amount of rain to stop us here. One of my mates up the back mentioned it earlier, so I will mention it for him: in the road from here to the racetrack there is a dip and it always stops the traffic there, but the rest of the road—north, south and east—is open. I do not know how we put that in—we will have to talk to the mayor later—but that needs to be rectified pretty shortly because it is an issue for us.

Mr HEAD: Just to reiterate that point that was made, I guess it is seen as a real inequality in life here. It is not until we get inches and inches in a lot of other places that people start even thinking about roads getting cut, and here you just have essentially a light shower come through and you are already having to make other plans. That impacts further on your access to services as well.

Mr Rowlands: Yes, it does. I do not know what the question is, but I just wanted you to know that a small rain is a problem.

Mr MILLAR: It is a double-edged sword.

Mr Rowlands: Yes.

CHAIR: Water helps the place so much, but it cuts you off.

Mr Rowlands: It does. You are happy with one end and not the other.

CHAIR: Thank you both very much. I know that you were not prepared, but you did a red-hot job. We appreciate your time. Thank you. There will be a copy of the transcript so you will be able to make sure everything was recorded accurately.

BROOK, Mr David, President, Birdsville Race Club

BROOK, Ms Jenna, Owner, Birdsville Roadhouse

BROOK, Mr Gary, Managing Director, Big Red Bash (via teleconference)

DONOVAN, Mr Greg, Managing Director, Outback Music Festival Group (via teleconference)

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr G Brook: Thank you for the opportunity to come here today. I just wanted to go back a little bit and describe some of the history of our events and how we have grown. The races were established back in 1882—over 140 years ago—with just 150 local station owners and managers at the first event, and it has grown and grown over 140 years to be what it is today. It is a Queensland icon. In 2009, when Queensland celebrated 150 years, it came in the top three festivals or sporting icons in the state, with only the Ekka and the State of Origin sitting above. The races have been critical to infrastructure in the whole of outback Queensland over a long period of time. I do not think it is going too far to say that absent the Birdsville Races we probably would not have the sealing of the roads that we have today in some areas. We certainly would not have the mobile coverage and it is probably unlikely that we would even have fibre-optic to Birdsville. It is really the event that has brought exposure and brought infrastructure and development into outback Queensland.

I can sit here and talk about the status and the culture and what it means for access and infrastructure. I am going to talk about pre pandemic. The Birdsville Races averaged 65,000 visitor nights per year for our event in the three years in the pre pandemic period. To put that into perspective, the Magic Millions in 2018 was 60,000 visitor nights. The Birdsville Races exceeded the Magic Millions in terms of the visitor nights that it pumps into Queensland. It contributes in the vicinity of \$5 million to \$7 million a year to the economy, and about half of that is in the Diamantina region. It is a significant contributor and it really does stand above and really bats well above its average in terms of what it contributes to the economy and what it contributes to visitors into Queensland. We know that racing has a big role to play—and I have already touched on its comparison with the Magic Millions, but I will draw a comparison with another huge event in Northern Queensland: something like the Cairns Amateurs that is very much talked about. That generates in the vicinity of 10,000 to 11,000 visitor nights. Birdsville Races is five times the nights in terms of people travelling. Pretty much everyone who is travelling to Birdsville is doing so via roads, and that is why access is so important.

I have spoken about figures pre pandemic and I want to draw a comparison with September last year, when it rained. Effectively, that 50,000, 60,000, 70,000 visitor nights became 26,000. It cost in the vicinity of 50,000 visitor nights because of rain in the area. It may have been rain just for a few days, but roads were closed in all directions. Fortunately, those roads did open prior to the event and allowed people to get in and out. Had that not happened, the impact to the Birdsville Race Club and the impact to the community would have been catastrophic. There is every chance that in the event of a cancellation of our event the Birdsville Race Club could become bankrupt. All of our costs are fixed, and once the staff and the equipment have been brought in, whether we hold the event or not, we still have to incur those costs. That goes for all of the businesses that are around the event as well. Last year was not the only year that it rained. It rained in 2016 and it rained in 2010. We do get a little bit nervous when we look at the long-range weather forecast and we see the impact that 10 millimetres, 15 millimetres or 20 millimetres of rain can have on one of the most iconic events in Queensland over the last 140 years.

The financial impact is not the only thing. I do want to touch on the safety aspect. We know that 55 per cent of road crash deaths occur in regional areas. The rate of road crash deaths in regional areas is close to five times that in the major cities, and it is well documented that poorer surface conditions and undivided roads increase that risk significantly. I am not just making that up. That is recorded in the National Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030.

The only other point that I would make as an opening statement is the missed access opportunity. Around 25 per cent of the vehicles in Australia, or 5½ million of the 20 million registered motor vehicles, are 4x4s. To get to Birdsville via the Windorah road you really do need a 4x4. You need something with significant clearance. In its current condition—and I know there is not a direct correlation between vehicle numbers and population numbers—I would say that we are effectively excluding 75 per cent of the population from being able to access Birdsville and being able to access the Birdsville Races. I will pause there. I am happy to answer any questions.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

CHAIR: Jenna, did you want to add to that?

Ms Brook: I own and operate the two service stations in town which, in addition to providing fuel, also supply groceries, postal services and automotive repairs in addition to the towing service in town. As a business owner who relies on the road network for delivery of critical supplies, I am grateful for this opportunity to provide some additional insight for this public hearing.

Connection in all its forms throughout regional and remote areas underpins the sustainability of these communities and allows us to live a life of relative convenience, somewhat similar to that of our coastal cousins. Whilst I am fully aware that we may not hold the same power in terms of votes garnered, I do believe that we punch above our weight when it comes to natural resources, tourism and agriculture. I have spent most of my 36 years living in Birdsville and it still astounds me that we do not have a fully sealed access road from any direction. Living in this reality, we understand that freight costs are likely to be higher with transport companies having to navigate dirt roads; that sometimes supplies might be delayed due to road conditions; and that in some cases it may be many weeks or indeed months between resupplies. Whilst we certainly understand that Mother Nature often cuts off many communities throughout Queensland, the difference is that our roads do not require extreme weather events to be closed. It is not the one-in-50-year flooding event or the one-in-100-year storm that we are talking about here; it is the fact that 10 to 20 millimetres of rain can seriously impact on supply chains.

In 2023, Birdsville should not continue to be held ransom by the weather. Local businesses should not need to be concerned that a small amount of rainfall is going to result in cancelled bookings, running out of fuel, food going to waste or supplies not getting here. An example of this is that in 2022 I was left with seven pallets of ice after the Birdsville Races when the supply truck had to turn around at Windorah due to a very small section of the road being closed after rain. After making a long detour, by the time it arrived most of the visitors in town had left. Not even considering all of the fresh produce that went to waste, I do not think you need to be a rocket scientist to work out that a town of 100 will not use 1,365 bags of ice before the bill is due. While there is no doubt that we have developed skills and processes for dealing with this uncertainty, I for one would be pleased to be rid of this added challenge when operating a remote business and be able to focus more on building business and providing locals and visitors with a better experience. After all, tourism is what sustains the Birdsville community. While the town may survive without it, it certainly will not thrive.

As a business owner, I am looking for ways to make Birdsville a year-round destination. While the idea of encouraging travellers to visit in summer may seem ludicrous, the fact remains that, in order for businesses to survive in these towns, we need more than a five-month window for generating revenue. With most of Australia's population living between Brisbane and Melbourne, it makes sense that the easiest access route for most of these visitors is going to be via Windorah. If we want to see Birdsville and the towns along the way benefit, then we need to be looking at the crucial role that road conditions play in ensuring people are confident to make plans to visit. If the local community and visitors can have this confidence in access then our ability to plan for the future, attract more residents and invest in the infrastructure required to serve a growing customer base will ultimately ensure that towns like Birdsville remain viable and thriving for the next generation.

Mr MILLAR: There was an idea that was raised this morning that does stand out—not that we have any control over South Australian politics, government or whatever. Australia is always looking for an inland highway. At the moment, the Queensland government announced Mungindi to Charters Towers but, given that we only have 15 kilometres left for the Birdsville to Bedourie section, if South Australia could strengthen at their end, is there an opportunity for an inland highway from Adelaide up to—

Ms Brook: To seal the Birdsville Track?

Mr MILLAR: Yes.

Ms Brook: You would have to talk to the South Australian government.

CHAIR: It is probably a little bit outside the scope, but I am happy to hear the answer.

Mr MILLAR: For our own knowledge, is it practical?

Mr D Brook: Money would beat it. South Australia is very Adelaide-centric. You would want to spend a bit of time in there and get everyone in Adelaide onside to commit funds.

Mr MILLAR: Is it practical, because of the way that Birdsville—

Mr D Brook: It would be practical, because you only have one decent river to go over—the Cooper—and that only runs once every 20 years down there. You could do it. In fact, they are sealing some sections of the Strzelecki Track and I think they are trying to seal it all up to Innamincka. That will be a plus for those communities, but to do the Birdsville Track as well—

Mr MILLAR: It is not something that we would advocate. I just wondered.

Mr D Brook: It would greatly benefit Queensland, because the people from Adelaide and Western Australia still want to come this way. They still use the dirt road—and Jenna would know about that because she has changed all of their tyres, and they blow heaps. When they come into Queensland, they want to go to Windorah, Mount Isa, Townsville or wherever. It is a good feedline for Queensland, but South Australia would see it as lost business.

CHAIR: I think it was Rodney who raised the good point—and I am making a statement here—that the trucks go via Alice Springs, and that stretch of road would save everyone dollars in the long run but it is not for me to comment on. We hear you.

Mr MINNIKIN: Jenna, small business is challenging for anyone and everyone who is involved in it, but particularly with the challenges that you have. How difficult has it been, with a lack of sealed roads in and out of Birdsville, to attract and retain staff in your different enterprises?

Ms Brook: To be honest, in my industry I am not sure roads are the biggest barrier. The ability to compensate people with revenue would probably be a bigger one. We simply cannot compete with wages that are in other industries, such as mining and things like that. A lot of my employees are backpackers and the Working Holiday Maker visa is really important for that. It would always be better if people could travel with conventional vehicles, which a sealed road would do. I think in my industry it is probably less so than some other ones.

Mr MARTIN: Looking forward to when the road does become sealed, do you have an expectation about what the change in visitor numbers might be? For the club, do you see a very large increase in numbers? Can you handle that increase if it happens? Also, do you see any other opportunities in the tourism sector for when the road is completed?

Mr D Brook: From a race club point of view, one of the points is that the races are held in September and the race club provides a lot of food and beverage at that time. The roadhouses have a lot of food on board, and the hotel has an enormous quantity of drinks available. The risk with the races is that after the races there is only about another month of tourists, so if the races fail or are cancelled all of that food will run out of date. Even beer runs out of date because it is all canned, and a lot of people do not want to drink those cans in February next year. There is a lot of waste. I can recall what happened one of the years when we had rain. Everyone wants fresh milk. The workshop over there got a lot of milk in, but the crowds did not come. To make it last, Jenna froze it, which we would do and we will still drink it after we thaw it out. The health inspector said, 'You can't sell it because it's out of date.' The amount of milk that had to get tipped out because it was out of date was incredible. That is criminal, but we could not sell it. We have lived on freezing things, long-life milk and all sorts of things.

Mr G Brook: I made a point in my statement that we are effectively excluding 75 per cent of the population. I would say that we are excluding 95 per cent of the international visitors to the country, because the average international visitor is not going to go to a hire car company trying to find the one in 30 four-wheel drive so they do not even bother. The exposure internationally is a big thing. In terms of the capacity to deal with growth, I can say that there would be growth—there is no question about that—and it can be managed. It can be managed by ensuring you have capacities. If we say we can handle 4,000, 6,000 or 8,000—and the bash can handle (inaudible)—then you just sell enough tickets that you can handle. With the Birdsville Races, because it is a low-cost event, I can quote numerous examples on social media at the moment of people saying, 'Have you bought your tickets?' We traditionally sell about 30 per cent of our tickets in advance. In terms of the primary reason we do not sell more than 30 per cent, if you look on social media where people are saying, 'Have you bought your tickets?' (inaudible).

CHAIR: Gary, could you repeat that because the phone dropped out?

Mr G Brook: We currently sell about 30 per cent of our event tickets in advance of the event. The primary reason (inaudible).

CHAIR: Gary, can you say that for a third time?

Mr G Brook: The primary reason that we have identified for people not being prepared to buy tickets in advance, which therefore allows us to plan, is the weather and road issues. (inaudible)

CHAIR: It has happened again.

Mr G Brook: I was on speaker so I will take it off speaker. We believe that the rain that occurred last year is a primary reason people are not purchasing tickets in advance of the event. They are saying on social media that they are worried about the roads so they are going to wait until the last minute before (inaudible) event. It scared so many people off committing to the event early, because they are worried they will not be able to get here or if they do get here they will not be able to get home.

CHAIR: What is the percentage of people who fly in? I know that in my electorate there is a coach company that brings people to this event and the Big Red Bash exclusively. Are there tourists who do not drive themselves?

Mr G Brook: It is a very small part. The number of fly-ins is very small. We are talking in the vicinity of maybe two to three per cent of our visitors who fly in. Most people are self-drive. In fact, 84 per cent of the visitors to the Birdsville Races are self-drive, about 10 or 12 per cent come via a tour, and about two or three per cent come via air.

Mr WALKER: Jenna, I have a question in relation to stock. How do you stock tyres? You talk about getting stock in and out and tyre sizes being 15, 16, 17, 18 and 20 inch. How do you stock it, and what is the value of that stock compared to most conventional tyre shops?

Ms Brook: Most conventional tyre shops would have their tyres on consignment so they would only be paying for them after they have sold them, effectively. We do not have that here. I hold less now than I used to, but I would hold anywhere in the vicinity of \$30,000 to \$60,000 worth of tyres at different times of the year in terms of value. It is really difficult.

We have a vast array of vehicles that come through Birdsville. During the COVID years, when we were the pathway into Queensland from everywhere, we had a two-door Fiat come up the Birdsville Track. We also have Rams, Chevy Silverados and things like that. We do our best to stock what we need, but it is difficult. We have access to fly-in freight from Charleville, which we sometimes will do if we need to get tyres in that we do not stock. More and more now, as a business owner trying to bring down the stock that I am holding, the variation in tyres that I stock has reduced.

Mr WALKER: That is interesting. So they will not give you consignment?

Ms Brook: The previous owners never had it and I have never gone down the path of trying to figure that out. We will sometimes order tyres in March and we might not sell them until July, so I am not sure how that would fly with tyre companies. Sometimes you can order a tyre and you never sell it because they change what those vehicles come off the floor with. The number of tyres that we have to dispose of because we have not sold them in three years, four years or five years is significant.

Mr WALKER: This is a critical point. We have all of these different types of vehicles. How do you make sure that people are not stuck here for weeks if you cannot get a plane or another vehicle in with those extra tyres and you are not doing the consignment? I think it is good that we have on the public record how that is challenging for the consumer and the sector—that is, industry and the tourists.

CHAIR: Please make a quick comment and then I will have to pull us up for a second.

Ms Brook: We do a remarkably good job of getting people moving as quickly as we can. There are times when people will be stuck for a week or two, depending on parts, depending on weight, depending on how we can get it here, if it is a dangerous good or it is not a dangerous good—all those kinds of things. There are lots of pieces that you have to fit together to get what you need when you need it and where you need it.

CHAIR: I am not cutting this off, but Greg Donovan from the Big Red Bash is expecting a phone call at 5.45. Would anyone have any concerns if we put him on as well?

Ms Brook: Go for it.

Mr G Brook: I am still here but I can drop off if you need the line.

CHAIR: Would that be okay, Gary? We will get you back on if needed.

Mr G Brook: That is fine. Give us a call if you have any other queries.

CHAIR: Thank you for your time. We appreciate it.

Mr G Brook: Thanks for the opportunity. Good luck, Chair.

Mr HEAD: While we are getting Greg on the phone, I might ask another question of Jenna. I am curious: when all the roads are good and you have options, where is your freight coming from?

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and
Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Ms Brook: It depends on the time of year as to when freight companies travel and how often they travel. There is a freight service that comes out of Adelaide on average once every two weeks. At the moment it is once a week and in summer it is once every three weeks. There is also a freight company that comes out of Townsville that runs every fortnight throughout the year. You have either a 1,200-kilometre journey or a 1,400-kilometre journey, both of which have to traverse dirt roads and both of which are, at times, impeded because of closed roads.

Mr HEAD: There have been comments about Adelaide, but, getting back to Queensland, so the roads north and east: do you source anything out of Mount Isa?

Ms Brook: I do not at all for the most part, no, but out of Townsville, yes. The Townsville truck will come via Windorah on that road and then head north back that way.

Mr HEAD: For you, that is fuel?

Ms Brook: Fuel comes out of Quilpie. He actually just delivered fuel this morning. Our normal freight supplies come out of Townsville.

Mr HEAD: I am trying to put it into context.

CHAIR: We now have Greg Donovan on the line. Thank you for joining us, Greg. Currently we have people from the Birdsville Roadhouse and the race club. Thanks for joining us. Currently we are talking about the tourism potential and what the road brings to assist that. The member for Callide is just finishing a line of questioning and then I will ask if you have an opening statement to fill us in. Member for Callide, could you please finish that line of questioning?

Mr HEAD: I am trying to paint a picture for the sake of the inquiry. Most of your freight, from the Queensland side, is coming from the Windorah direction, essentially.

Ms Brook: Correct.

Mr HEAD: In your opening statement you talked about how critical it is that we not only try to look at finishing the last 16 or 18 kays north but also look seriously at significant upgrades to the road between here and Windorah as well.

Ms Brook: Yes. I think it is important, because it probably allows those businesses that are providing the freight to service more areas by being able to do a loop instead of simply going out and back. I guess in improving that road in from Windorah you allow those companies to do that. Instead of just coming to Birdsville and going back again, they can obviously get more bang for their buck to service more areas.

Mr HEAD: Finally, you were talking about the ice pallet to get freight here. Are you paying a fixed rate per kilometre or do you have to pay extra on your freight charges for that?

Ms Brook: We pay a fixed rate per pallet.

Mr MARTIN: There are people who think maybe sealing the road would change the nature of Birdsville. Do you have any comments on that?

Ms Brook: I am sure it will change the nature of Birdsville. I think it will improve everything. Sure, some undesirables might appear, but I think on the whole the positives would far outweigh the negatives. I have lived here for 36 years now and the population of Birdsville has not changed. That is something that I have always thought is an odd phenomenon. All of our telecommunications, our health services, our ability to get in and out by plane, education and all those things have improved vastly in 36 years, yet we have not had more people who want to move here. I am sure that part of that is the cost of living, access, the types of vehicles that you have to have and all those sorts of things combined. Every little bit that we can do to improve the livability of rural and remote towns is certainly going to be of benefit. I am sure all business owners in Birdsville would also enjoy having more people pass through their doors.

CHAIR: Greg, thank you for joining us. Would you like to make an opening statement about the Big Red Bash, what it brings and how the roads help?

Mr Donovan: I am out in the back of Mundi Mundi and my connection is a bit sketchy. I am just catching a little of what you are saying. Would you like me to speak about the Big Red Bash and the road situation?

CHAIR: Yes, please.

Mr Donovan: You have probably read my submission so I am not going to go over that in any great detail. Obviously, the Big Red Bash has become a really successful event and is now one of the major drivers of tourism to the outback. We have up to 5,000 cars, caravans and so forth that head to Birdsville each July. The event generates over \$20 million of tourism benefits broadly Birdsville

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

throughout the region and the outback, based on independent research by Tourism and Events Queensland. For this year the research has just about finished and it is indicating an increase in that tourism benefit even from last year, so it is a very successful tourism event.

We also do statistics on the people coming to the event. We ask them a few questions. A couple of the questions that we ask include: 'Is this your first trip to Birdsville and is this your first trip to the outback?' On average, we find that about 60 per cent of our patrons coming to the Big Red Bash are making their very first trip to Birdsville and between 38 and 40 per cent of people are actually coming for the very first time to the outback. The event is attracting a lot of new people to the outback. They are people who are inexperienced probably with driving on the types of roads that are in the outback, particularly on dirt roads for long distances.

I guess those statistics show you that the event is actually bringing new and valuable tourism to the outback—people who otherwise would not come, or many of whom would not come other than because of this event. When they do come to the outback and to Birdsville, they generally spend two to three weeks in their trips travelling around. It is not just the event; they use the event as their main destination and activity, but they do visit a lot of the other outback towns and regions. That is why the benefit to the outback is so great as it attracts many new people to the outback, to visit the whole of the region.

Obviously, in terms of the roads, a big part of our event is safety. With 10,000 people in a remote area in the desert, we have a huge focus on safety and risk management. We do everything we can to make it a safe event. One of the things that is always fairly high on our radar, in terms of safety and risk management, is the travelling side of it. On average, people are doing a 4,000-kilometre trip to and from the bash. The last couple of hundred kays or so are on dirt roads generally, if they are coming in from Windorah. We spend a lot of time educating people about that—safety on dirt roads and all those sorts of things. It is a major concern. You can do as much education as you like, but you still have a fairly high level of risk with all those cars travelling together on those dirt roads. Obviously, there is not just one way into Birdsville. The roads can be in the best condition possible, all fully graded and all nice and ready for tourists to come. By the time you have had 5,000 cars travelling over the roads they do deteriorate quite a bit in certain areas. Really, they require a lot of maintenance and upkeep with the traffic that the event brings out.

I think you may have spoken to the Birdsville Race Club about the Birdsville Races. Our event, the Big Red Bash, is on seven-odd weeks before the Birdsville Races. Probably the roads are impacted by the Birdsville Big Red Bash and generally it is not enough time to fully maintain and restore the roads back to a good condition before the races. There are issues with having two major events within a fairly short period and the road situation there.

Those are the main points that I wanted to make. We certainly believe that if there were safer roads and more sealed roads then the opportunities to further increase visitation and bring new people to the outback would be significantly increased. We have increased the crowds to the Big Red Bash over the years and they keep coming. We have sold out the event for the past five or six years. There is definitely a demand there. I think better roads would make it safer for people to come and we would get more people who want to come to Birdsville.

The point I make with that, too, is that if we can get people to come to Birdsville and the far reaches of the outback then that benefits the whole outback, because generally they have to travel through many towns and regions to get there. It is like having a show somewhere on the Sunshine Coast and people will travel up from Brisbane. If you have a show or something happening in Birdsville, they are travelling 1,600 kilometres from South-East Queensland and spending a lot of money along the way, so the economic benefits flow from there. I guess those are the points that I wanted to make in relation to the event. Obviously, I am happy to field any questions.

CHAIR: Yesterday we went for a trip to where you hold this amazing event and had a look. We were told that the road out there has recently been sealed, before the last event. Could you touch on the benefit of sealing that bit of road and whether that helped the event?

Mr Donovan: I apologise for the internet connection here. I am at our festival in Broken Hill and there is a bit of band noise that I am finding it hard to get away from. I can get away, but where I get away to has no internet connection so there is a bit of background noise.

CHAIR: We do have your submission and it is quite comprehensive. We appreciate what you have just gone through as well. I want to ask about the road out to the event. Yesterday we went out to where you hold it. Did that sealed section help the event this year?

Mr Donovan: My apologies, I am not really hearing much of that.

CHAIR: We might leave questions at this stage. We really appreciate your submission, thank you.

Mr Donovan: No problems, thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to the inquiry.

CHAIR: I will chat to you sometime later about the event because I think it is fantastic. I have a personal interest there. I am sure the member for Callide has a question. He always has questions.

Mr HEAD: We have been talking about what has been done in relation to the five-kilometre overtaking lanes and things like that. With future works, what should the state government look to do better or differently or what should we be doing to work towards the ultimate goal of having significantly improved access in and out of here?

Ms Brook: This is just a personal opinion. I think there are some critical points on the road to Windorah where rain often causes the road to close. They might not be very long sections. The creeks near Windorah are already sealed but they come up, close the road for a couple of days and go down again because they have a deep section in them. A couple of detours they have used over the last couple of years have caused a lot of strife, particularly to heavy vehicles. Then there are a few other sections between here and where the bitumen starts proper.

For me as a business owner—obviously safety is paramount—what I would like to see is the areas that are most likely to flood and most at risk of closing the road to be the focus. Everyone else behind me might argue with me, but that is what will keep the road open. The gravel road is very well built. I am not a road engineer but our roads are great. The council does a great job. They can hold up to some rain, but there are sections that are much more susceptible. From my point of view as a business owner, those are the areas where I would be advocating that money be spent, but these guys might argue with me on that.

CHAIR: That local knowledge is important. We appreciate that.

Mr HEAD: Perhaps that is something that has not been done in the past because some of those areas might be more expensive—

Ms Brook: They would be very expensive to do, yes.

Mr HEAD: They have been overlooked—

Ms Brook: 100 per cent.

Mr HEAD: The money has been spent on sections where they can say, 'We have sealed 10 kilometres,' instead of five.

Ms Brook: Which is great, and no-one is ever going to argue with that at all. If you are asking for my personal opinion, based on no expertise of building roads, fixing those areas to keep the road open would be my opinion.

Mr WALKER: I want to publicly thank David and Nell and the family for hosting us yesterday out where the Big Red Bash is held. That was an eye-opener. I had no idea of the size and gravity of that event, let alone the size of your property and the history. Your family history is amazing. You have a lot of insight. From the day you started as a young man in the stock sector, can you share with us how extensive your history is and what you have said about the road network and the industry as a whole going forward?

CHAIR: I am glad you brought it back to roads.

Mr WALKER: Yes, I did. It is back to roads.

Mr D Brook: I will stick to the roads part.

Mr WALKER: No. We can go back a little bit.

CHAIR: It is impressive.

Mr D Brook: When I started it was at the tail end of the drovers taking the cattle out. Trucks were only just starting. They had come to some places.

Mr WALKER: On horseback.

Mr D Brook: Yes. The drovers would walk the cattle to Marree—500 kilometres—or Quilpie. Some would walk them to Betoota and Clifton Hills. The northern ones might go north. That was until the trucks started. We could start to get trucks into our block in the mid-sixties. That was a gain for us. Before that, we were not worried too much about roads.

Mr WALKER: You are droving with horses over many hundreds of miles.

Mr D Brook: Hundreds of kilometres. We cannot say we have not been going forward. Those early trucks were only single-deck trucks. Then they pulled a dog. One of our truckies from Lyndhurst came in for something to eat and said, 'I've pulled up and I've left my dog out the back.' Nell said, 'What did you leave the dog out there for?' But the dog was the trailer! Anyway, that is how we got them out. Time goes on. We got double-decker trucks, so we needed better roads. For a long time we had to walk the cattle the first 100 kilometres. The council and others gradually clayed over the sandhills. You saw Big Red there. That is one of the more recent ones.

To do our job now we need the roads. Our business particularly ships out cattle about 45 times a year in trucks. In the early days when I started, we shipped out cattle about three times a year and about one-tenth of the numbers. Properties would get dry. You would have cattle ready to go but you would get to September and the drovers would say to Bill, my dad, or to me, 'David, I don't think we can take them now because the water along the stock route to Marree or Betoota has dried up. We'll have to hang about. We'll take them in April next year.' If the drought continued, by then 500 would have died or whatever because you cannot shift them. You have no water. Now, as I said, we can truck 45 times a year. We have council roads and we have our own roads into the property.

In the early days we had no trucking yards. You saw one yesterday. That is the first one. We have about 23 of those now, so we can take trucks on roads everywhere. We can muster the cattle up within two days, draft them up, put them on trucks and supply them through the international network every week, whereas 50 years ago they would sit there and by February or April next year they would have lost weight and they would not be in good condition.

Mr WALKER: The reason I raise this in relation to the road network and the investment is that we have gone from horses to trucks, from dirt roads and crossing riverbeds to sealed roads, from a single-bed truck to double-decker trucks to road trains.

Mr D Brook: That is right.

Mr WALKER: This is just your operation—200 head a week.

Mr D Brook: Yes, about that. Nine decks is 190. This week it is 12 decks—264 go out. They go to Stanbroke near Brisbane. That keeps 300 or 400 people there employed half a day one day and half a day another day. We have to pay, obviously—Dalene has to through OBE—to do that. It is not only us where the dollar is. It has to come back here eventually for the animals. All that employment is generated down there. The truckies pick them up. The different carriers take them to the wharf or run them to Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. Some of the meat ends up in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Vietnam, America, Dubai, Saudi and about four other countries.

Mr WALKER: I was about to ask you about the international component. For the record, the reason the road network is so important, as a component for one operator, is that investment—exporting to the world and putting Birdsville on the map, not just for racing or the Big Red Bash but for the industry and how we value-add from here all the way to the abattoirs and to the rest of the world. I just wanted to get that on the record.

Mr D Brook: Our properties—basically, we produce through Stanbroke—produce a minimum of about 55,000 kilos a week. Next week it will be 75,000 kilos because that will be the 12 decks. It goes in deck lots and it depends on orders. Of that—and I stand to be corrected—perhaps 60 per cent is exported. The other 40 per cent—that is, 20,000 kilos or 25,000 kilos—goes to four states at the moment, not Western Australia and not NT.

Mr WALKER: Organic.

Mr D Brook: Organic. There are quite a lot of other suppliers coming online. You heard Tony here from Mount Leonard and Cluny. The whole of northern South Australia pretty much has gone organic and a lot of the Lake Eyre Basin. Besides roads, we have been screaming to make sure that there is no damage done to the environment either by roads blocking rivers or by putting down bores into the ground that might damage the watertable. There are multiple things. I know it is not about that today. The organic story is a great plus for Queensland. It is a good plus for us and for our industry—extra money.

CHAIR: I was going to bring the member back because this session is about the Birdsville Race Club. The member did ask the question and he may write to you to further benefit the committee. Do you have any questions about the Birdsville Races? I know that the member for Callide will have a question about the Birdsville Race Club or the Birdsville Races.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr HEAD: In past jobs I have had, local government might have been talking about not just having bitumen access one way. If you had bitumen coming in from the east and from the north then you would have a circuit which in itself can become its own tourist trail. People talk about dinosaur way and things like that. I thought you might want to comment on whether you have thought about that in the past.

Ms Brook: The more bitumen the better. A circuit is always going to be of benefit, whether it is to services or visitors, because who wants to come and go in the same direction? If you are in a two-wheel drive Toyota Camry, you have to come and go the same way at the moment. You have to come in from the north and go back out to the north. If there is an opportunity for those people to go another way out, I do not see how there could possibly be a negative associated with that.

Mr D Brook: If you are looking at a hotel, the hotel has had a big publicity campaign going for 10 years called The Outback Loop.

Mr MILLAR: Innamincka.

Mr D Brook: It is created to bring in the Flinders Ranges, Innamincka up to Cordillo, then here and down to Marree through Mungerannie to get people on the loop. I have many times suggested to the Queensland authorities to get people on at Blackall, Barcaldine, Longreach, Winton, Boulia, Bedourie, Birdsville, Windorah, back through Jundah or Quilpie to Charleville—all of that. That is really logical, and that is what people want to do when they travel. Some want to go to Mount Isa and go down the mines.

CHAIR: I have to mention for the record that we are looking at the roads that have been built. Just bring us back to that, member for Callide. Are there any further questions? We have a little bit more time. Is there anyone here who wants to make a final statement about the roads?

Mr MILLAR: Let's go to the audience.

CHAIR: That is what I am asking. The member for Callide has had a good run. Is there anyone else who would like to provide any input? Thank you, Jenna. Thank you, David. We really appreciate that. We will no doubt talk further this evening while the Matildas win.

APPLETON, Ms Anna, Private capacity

FULLAGAR, Mr Ben, Birdsville Hotel

SCHUTT, Mr Tony, General Manager, Arrabury Pastoral Company

WATKINS, Mr Greg, Private capacity

CHAIR: Thank you. It has been an interesting afternoon. We might start with Greg.

Mr Watkins: Greg Watkins is my name. I am one of Jenna's 'backpackers'. I am not a backpacker but I work for Jenna. My wife and I have been here just under two years. One of the difficulties we faced when we first came here was: we looked at buying or doing something in relation to real estate. Since I have been here there has not been a house up for sale, as far as I am aware. I know that at one stage the shire was trying to organise to get a contract for four or five houses to be built here for residents, because obviously you need houses for people to live here to increase the population. I think off the top of my head they got a quote in relation to that for about a million dollars per house to build. I made a number of inquiries on how I could get a building brought here and a building built here. As soon as we started talking dirt roads, the price went up. That is a small problem. I know that there are four other people in town in the same boat as me who were looking to do something in relation to buying and building.

We do not at this stage have a full-time electrician in town and nor do we have a full-time plumber in town, so getting those services into town is important. Obviously there is a builder who visits now and again. Whilst he seems to be a great builder and he has built in this area for a long time, he is at a stage of his life where he is not interested in building houses, so to get a house built here is quite difficult. That is what I have found in the two years.

CHAIR: That ties back into the roads.

Mr Watkins: Yes. It has to do with the fact that people have to travel a long distance, generally from the east. There are not many builders north of here, because obviously they want to stay up in the Isa or around that area, but getting people to come from the east is almost impossible plus prohibitive.

Ms Appleton: We have only been in this region for six months, so it is all very new to us. In terms of everything that has been said today, I completely support everyone's statements. One of the things that was not mentioned by anyone today that I have heard in terms of access to services is that access to education is really important. In town there is obviously a state school, but on the rural properties distance education is the only option. We need to have access for those children to be able to get to school, wherever that might be—Mount Isa, Charleville, wherever they need to go—and in addition to that there is boarding school. I think it is really important that families can access those services and stayed connected.

Mr Fullagar: Thanks for having us. I want to make just a couple of points to carry on from a few points that people have already made today. Just on race club comments on ticket sales and things like that, I wear a few hats. I run the hotel, run the bakery and run Birdsville Aviation. When it comes to these types of events, ordering for us is obviously the biggest danger. When you have people holding off on prebuying tickets because of road closures or potential road closures, it is nearly impossible to order.

I find that the climate is changing. I have been involved for 10 years. In terms of the 2015, 2016 and 2017 races, in 2016 there was a little bit of rain. You just had a formula that you went off when you went to order. We always had about the same amount of numbers. In the last few years with Birdsville-based events, we have unfortunately had rain falling before, during or just after and people are a little bit gun-shy, and things like that are why people hold off from buying the tickets.

From our perspective, just for the races alone for the hotel you would normally outlay for about \$300,000 worth of stock, and that is a massive gamble. The reality of that \$300,000 worth of stock is: if it rains on the Wednesday and the racing is Friday and Saturday and the race event is cancelled, we are sitting on that \$300,000 worth of stock. Our season finishes not long after the races, so for us it is a massive gamble. While we always continue to support the event, sometimes you get nervous to the point where you go, 'Are we really making the right decisions here?' You start to doubt yourself a little bit, but the show must go on so you have to be resilient and push through that.

The customers are changing. Ten years ago, if you spoke to tourists about putting bitumen roads in from Windorah or from Bedourie down you would probably get a lot of backlash. Customers are changing. When I first started travelling out here you did not look at weather patterns and you did

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

not look at forecasts; you just got in your car and went. If it rained you got bogged and you would dig yourself out and you would keep going. That customer base is totally different now. People are used to having all the information in the palm of their hand, so they do monitor the weather very closely and as soon as it looks like there is going to be any change in road conditions they just do not leave. They just change their itinerary.

There are a lot of other options for tourism apart from Western Queensland within our own state, and a lot of other very good options such as Cape York in particular and Fraser Island. I have a business on Fraser Island. It is going gangbusters. Why? Because there are no access problems whatsoever apart from the odd king tide here and there. We have certainly seen a down trend in visitation—even before COVID. Before the pandemic we had seen a down trend in visitation purely based around the fact that people get gun-shy. They have invested a lot of money in their four-wheel drive, but that does not particularly mean they want to go and use it to its potential.

Another example for us is: we have been investing a lot of money back into our businesses and trying to do a renovation to a specific area of the business over each summer, when there are no tourists. One of the renovations we did which was budgeted at \$300,000 for bathrooms had an extra \$75,000 put on top because of road closures. Once you start working on that particular project, it does not stop. Our builders at that particular time and our trades were driving in and out. We had road closures. We were lucky enough to own our own 14-seat aeroplane—the company—but that does not mean it is cheap to run. At \$2,500 an hour across the trips for trades, we spent \$75,000 moving those trades around, additional to the budget of the job to do the renovation.

When you look at businesses in regional areas you see a lot of properties around that do not particularly show any interest in investing back into their businesses, and that has a lot to do with the fact that they are also a little bit gun-shy. We start investing and then we get roads cut off and we do not have the spend, but it also costs us a hell of a lot more money to carry out the renovation. They are just a couple of things. I am sure we all appreciate you guys looking at this.

Finally, I really would back up what Jenna said. Obviously we are all realists and we know that the bitumen is just not going to get laid tomorrow, so identifying those problem areas and making them a priority would be a huge advantage to us, starting from just right here at the Diamantina River, because that 400-metre section goes underwater. You could have the road totally bitumened between here and Windorah and you could drive out there in a Toyota Corolla and you will get to the racetrack and you will not get to Birdsville. The starting point is right there at the end of this street. The biggest financial impact for us is the first 400 metres to a kilometre from the town grid. Thank you.

Mr HEAD: I am curious about you talking about a decline in trade. Perhaps it is social media and everything like that impacting it, and even talking to Tony earlier about tyres and how the sealing that has been done has significantly improved that. On one hand, access has improved a fair bit today. It is not where we all want it in the long term, but do you want to elaborate on that?

Mr Fullagar: Absolutely. In terms of the roads at the moment, the current dirt roads are probably the best I have seen them in my 10 years out here, but people do not believe that unless they come and drive them. The biggest issue around the roads and the messages that go out about the poor condition is social media. Rarely you will see posts go up of people saying how smooth the road is, but the minute the road turns to mush and there are cars stuck or there is a caravan jackknifed—if you look at the Big Red Bash and those travelling with the Big Red Bash, I think they have 70,000 or 80,000 followers on there whereas our page has 50-odd thousand followers—and the minute a photo goes up on any of these social media pages showing someone stuck, that goes out to so many different people on so many different platforms that prior to social media would not have had any idea. They just would have left home on their trip and driven to Birdsville and dealt with the conditions they were confronted with.

Mr MARTIN: Ben, thanks for your submission there. There was previous mention, I think by Greg, about international tourism and international visitors. I was wondering if you could share with the committee your experience with international visitors—who are they and where are they coming from? Are they people looking for a more high-end experience? Anything you can share with the committee about that would be great.

Mr Fullagar: It is pretty slim. International visitation to Birdsville is pretty slim. If we do see international visitors, it is more over the summer periods and they are usually European—predominantly German, we find—that like to come out here when there are no people around. Germans in particular have a real adventurous streak. That is predominantly what we would see in Birdsville, and it is only over those quieter summer months. We do not see really any international tourism over those quieter periods. We have international staff but not necessarily international

tourism. I think a big part of that is the unknown. What are they heading into? It is the unknown. It is the online content about the condition of the roads and that type of stuff and probably something that will take many years to address. One of the other big problems with international tourists we have spoken to who have made inquiries but have not turned up is the fact that rental car companies just will not rent them cars for this region because they do get knocked about, so they do not have access—and no-one really wants to sit on the Rex plane for five or six stops.

Mr MILLAR: We have done that.

CHAIR: Yes. We have done that and I can tell you we were probably the happiest people on the plane, knowing that we were getting off midflight.

Mr MINNIKIN: Mr Chair, if I could just make a quick comment: do not take the fact that there are probably few questions as a slight. Everything that the three of you raised in your submissions just before was absolutely critically important, and you should be congratulated.

CHAIR: I was just going to say that; thank you, member for Chatsworth. I want to agree with that. The education point was very well taken and this is adding meat to the bones, so thank you all very much.

Mr HEAD: I am curious, Ben, with your business. What do the tourists say about the road when they are coming out here and they go through the gravel sections and they see a new bit of bitumen? Do you ever get questions on the width of it?

Mr Fullagar: The honest answer to that—and it is a very straight-to-the point answer—is that we call it ‘shattered dreams’, because a lot of people have a lot of dreams of travelling out to visit us. We are a major bucket list destination and they invest massive amounts of money in their equipment and they plan for a year, sometimes two years. Their journey starts well before they arrive in Birdsville. Their journey starts when they decide with their group of friends to make the trip to Birdsville and then the planning meetings start at friends’ places for barbecues on the weekend, or they might go on a camping trip somewhere else and talk about their trip to Birdsville and they plan it. The journey is much bigger than just the destination. Unfortunately, the current state of the roads, particularly when it gets a lot of rock on the surface, means that the dreams are shattered. We see it regularly—and I am sure Jenna sees it at the roadhouse—when they get here and they turn on the tap in the caravan and no water comes out or the step has gone or the back window on the car is smashed to a million pieces. That is the reality. I reckon we would notice three to four cars a week with bent chassis. In terms of the tyres they go through, you only have to look at our dump to see the number of dead tyres down at the town tip.

The problem then is much bigger than just those people who have had their dreams shattered. The problem then is that they go home and they tell their friends and they put their photos up on social media of the back window busted and it actually just starts to snowball. It is a much bigger problem than the individual having a bad trip or a poor experience on the road. Long term—I am not going to lie—that is a very big concern for the people who have money and time invested in this particular region.

Mr HEAD: With regard to the works that have been done, how important have they been and how important is it to not just this region but also Queensland that we continue?

Mr Fullagar: They have been important for probably the people that live here, because I certainly notice a big difference when I drive in and out, and I do 70,000 or 80,000 kays a year on the roads out here. For me, being here for 10 years—nowhere near as long as some of the other speakers tonight—I notice a huge difference. My trip is a lot easier than it used to be, but for the tourists, especially if they are first-timers, it is no advantage to them. The general tourist is not as resilient as they used to be. Even though you guys and our local councils have done a huge amount of work to increase and improve the conditions of our current roads, with the lack of resilience in today’s tourists and society as a whole they think it is pretty bloody ordinary. We certainly see an improvement, but I do not think a lot of people travelling do.

Mr MILLAR: They have high expectations.

CHAIR: They have no perspective, either, because they did not see what it was.

Mr Fullagar: No.

Mr Watkins: And where that resilience comes from is that a lot of these manufacturers are telling them, ‘You are buying an off-road caravan’ and ‘You are buying an off-road vehicle,’ and they are getting out here and their vehicles are breaking and their caravans are breaking. They are breaking bits and pieces and they are told they are off-road, but they are not.

Public Hearing—Public works inquiry into the state controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah

Mr Fullagar: That is right. It is a massive problem. You only have to look at Ford that put a TV commercial out of the Ford Territory towing a boat over a sandhill. You would not believe, when that came out—we are probably going back four or five years now—how many people tried to tow large caravans and other pieces of equipment to Birdsville and had massive failures of the motor vehicle because the Ford Motor Co. did the marketing around that. There is a lot more disappointment when people arrive in Birdsville than you would believe.

Mr MILLAR: Yes, and that is probably more natural selection, too. Anybody should know you cannot take a caravan—

Mr Fullagar: For us, yes, but if you live on the coast, certainly not.

CHAIR: Thank you all very much. It is much appreciated. I do not know if the member for Callide wants to make it a question on notice from Tony about the tyres and wear.

Mr HEAD: It does not have to be a formal question on notice, but if he has those figures on hand and wants to share them—

CHAIR: If you can get them to us. If you do not, we are not going to make it formal then, are we?

Mr HEAD: No.

Mr Schutt: A fair bit of that data that we got was a little bit on the back of an envelope, a cigarette packet and that sort of thing. Some of that data we kept was just in notebooks and on the back of envelopes, but I have made a couple of phone calls and we are researching it. If I can get it, I can get it to someone.

Mr MILLAR: Yes, you can flick it to me.

CHAIR: Once again, I really would like to thank you all for your attendance and interest here today. We really appreciate it. We have taken it all on board and I echo the remarks from the member for Chatsworth.

Mr MILLAR: Mr Chair, I just quickly want to say thank you to you and Jodhi for coming out here. It does mean a lot.

CHAIR: It is the whole committee. I declare this hearing closed—and let's go watch the Matildas win!

The committee adjourned at 6.32 pm.