

Public Works Inquiry into the state controlled roads from Birdsville to Bedourie and Birdsville to Windorah

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Birdsville Race Club Submission to the Queensland Government Public works inquiry into the state-controlled roads between Birdsville and Bedourie and from Birdsville to Windorah 16th August 2023

The Birdsville Races

Way back in the Spring of 1882, a group of 150 owners, managers and stockmen came together on the South Australian and Queensland border for the first – and unofficial – Birdsville Races event. They managed to raise nearly 200 pounds by public subscription, enough to draw a significant crowd at the time – but a far cry from the \$300,000 in prize money on offer today.

What happened next reads like a movie script, and the first iteration of the Birdsville Race Club was born.

The community gathered at Burt and Co.'s large iron store and the 'Border Jockey Club' was formed, being 42 members strong. Stewards were appointed, a working committee elected, and the next race meeting was fixed for July, 1883. Now, well over 140 years later, the race continues to grow as an iconic Australian event – and something that is high on many people's 'bucket list'

In 2009 Qld celebrated 150 years. The **Queensland's Q150 Icons** list of [cultural icons](#) was compiled as part of [Q150](#) celebrations in 2009 by the [Government of Queensland](#), Australia. It represented the people, places and events that were significant to [Queensland's](#) first 150 years.

In the events and festivals category, only 2 sat above the Birdsville Races, the Ekka and the State of Origin. That is the status that the Birdsville Races holds in Qld's history and its folklore. It is an icon and it has paved the way for so many other events in Qld.

It has been a critical catalyst for infrastructure support and funding and I don't think its too far to say that absent the Birdsville Races, we may not have mobile coverage in Birdsville but we certainly wouldn't have fibre optic that is designed to handle the load provided by large events.

But we can sit here and discuss icons, status and culture but what does it means for access and infrastructure.

The statistics

Averaged 65000 visitor nights in the 3-year pre pandemic period.

From the 2018 Tourism Value Report

- 2018 Birdsville Races generated 65,568 visitor nights and total overnight expenditure exceeding \$6.7m in Qld. This was from 5596 unique individuals.
- 26,000 of those were in the Diamantina region, The majority of these nights were generated by intrastate visitors (13,399).
- By comparison the 2018 Magic Millions Raceday, Pacific Fair Magic Millions Polo and Yearling Sales contributed almost 60,000 total visitor nights to Queensland.
- The Birdsville Races outshone the Magic millions

From the 2019 Tourism Value report:

- 2019 Birdsville Races generated 55,872 visitor nights and total overnight expenditure exceeding \$5.4m. This was from 4971 unique individuals.
- 24,000 of those were in the Diamantina region
- + The top three methods of transport to Birdsville was 'vehicle with campervan / caravan / motorhome' (58.0%), 'vehicle without campervan / caravan / motorhome' (33.5%), and 'private plane' (3.1%).

In May 2020, Racing Minister Stirling Hinchliffe said racing could play a key role in Queensland's post-pandemic recovery, with the industry responsible for generating \$1.5 billion to the state's economy per annum.

A 2020 economic report commissioned by RQ found the Magic Millions generated an incredible 91,104 total visitor nights. In addition to the Magic Millions, the two-day Amateurs Carnival in Far North Queensland generated 11,110 visitor nights and \$3.6 million in direct economic impact, while the iconic Birdsville Races was responsible for 55,872 visitor nights and \$5.4 million to the state's economy.

In event terms we bat above our average in terms of visitor nights.

All of this is not possible without access and we remain at the mercy of the elements;

Compare the pre pandemic figures with September 2022 when the primary difference was the rain and road closures.

- We experienced road closures in all directions so total unique visitors were down and total visitor nights around 26,000 and just over 12000 in the Diamantina region

Fortunately, roads opened just prior to the event but absent that the impact to the Birdsville Race Club would have been catastrophic. In short, once race week commences, we must hold an event. Our costs are largely fixed and a scenario that involves ticket refunds when all costs have been expended could bankrupt the club and see the end of 141 years of the Birdsville Race Club.

In 2016 we had rain that forced road closures for multiple days and in 2010 we had over 4000 people stranded in Birdsville for 3 days post races.

Each year we remain on edge. Road closures can be catastrophic financially for the club and other businesses but perhaps more importantly is safety.

Safety

The National Road Safety Strategy 2021 – 2030 [Factsheet: Regional road safety | National Road Safety Strategy](#) reports that

- Fifty-five per cent of road crash deaths occur in regional^[1] areas of Australia.
- The rate of road crash deaths is 9.6 per 100,000 people in regional Australia, compared with 2.2 per 100,000 in major cities.
- Key reasons for higher death rates outside of cities are high speed roads – a greater proportion of the crashes are in higher speed zones. A number of roads in regional and remote areas are

undivided, single carriageways with poorer surface conditions and design, and increased road side hazards (legacy road standard).

- The strategy reports that sealing is one of that strategies needed to reduce these crashes

Economic Opportunity

If we consider the Windorah to Birdsville road, it is only comfortably accessible by high clearance vehicles (4WD) and while you may make it in a conventional sedan, you risk your car and your own safety.

The ABS report that there were 20.1 million registered motor vehicles as at 31 January 2021 and about 5.5m are 4WD. While this isn't an exact correlation, we are essentially limiting access to 75% of the population (based on their own vehicle).