

Keeping rail reform on track

Australia needs a coherent national planning process for the rail industry, the House of Representatives Transport Committee has been told at a forum on rail reform held in Sydney. The forum was arranged by the House Transport Committee as a follow-up to its 1998 report *Tracking Australia*, which included 16 recommendations on the future of rail in the national transport network.

The rail forum heard that while the rail industry has been fundamentally transformed, and is now dominated by private sector operators, more reform was needed. The Australasian Railway Association and private sector operators called for consistent access and pricing in the rail industry, harmonised operating and safety standards and integrated accreditation procedures.

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Concerns were expressed about the charges that apply to rail transport as compared to road transport. National Rail argued that rail operators pay at least 50 per cent more in access charges compared to road operators on interstate transport corridors. This results in more heavy truck use on roads, says the rail industry.

Newspoll surveys add weight to the rail industry's call for more reform, the Australasian Railway Association told the House Transport Committee. Of those surveyed, 90 per cent believed that more money should be spent developing rail freight, 86 per cent believed that rail was more environmentally friendly than road transport and 80 per cent opposed more trucks, particularly heavier and longer trucks, on the road.

"The forum was one way of ensuring that our parliamentary report did not just sit on a shelf," said House Transport Committee Chairman, Paul Neville (Member for Hinkler, Queensland). "As a House of

Representatives committee, we have investigated a range of issues and produced a number of well-received reports. Those reports are produced to assist in overcoming problems and deficiencies that have been identified in our portfolio areas of transport, communications and the arts.

"Committee members put in a great deal of time and effort to produce well reasoned and actionable recommendations,"

Mr Neville said. "By having follow-up seminars, we ensure that the recommendations we make get the attention they deserve.

"The forum we held in Sydney has helped to maintain the momentum towards rail reform, by promoting discussion on the rail priorities and benchmarks which the Federal Government has set in response to the recommendations we made in the *Tracking Australia* report.

"By bringing together public and private rail operators, Commonwealth and State transport authorities, peak representative organisations and the major rail union, the forum enabled the main players in the industry to outline their views on the progress of rail reform," Mr Neville said. "At the same time, it has helped us to identify continuing obstacles to reform and to seek out ideas for overcoming those obstacles."

A March 2001 report on the progress of rail reform is expected from the House Transport Committee. "As we have shown by holding this forum, we aim to follow up our reports to make sure that our recommendations are considered and acted upon by government," Mr Neville said.

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