

Blue Mountains Gazette - Letters To The Editor

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An Unlevel Surface

The concerted local campaign against heavy truck transport has focussed on the primary issues of safety and quality of life for those using or living beside the highway. There has been particular antagonism to the massive B-doubles and the unnecessary diversion of coal transport onto road. Mountains residents are desperate to preserve what quality of life is possible in our towns strung out along the highway.

The state government has given little indication that it understands community preference for bulk materials to go by rail, and in a backward step, Shell has recently ditched rail for road to shift petroleum to the country. Locally, Clarence Colliery intends to ramp up its output and move it by road. Obviously for coal miners global warming is not issue, neither during transport nor from end use.

The reason, of course, is cost. But rail is disadvantaged, with trucks being subsidised by ordinary users. The AASHO study (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) was groundbreaking. For example, a truck with 36 tonnes on the steer axle and 16 tonnes on each tandem axle causes nearly 8000 times the road damage as a 2 tonne car. This is because damage caused is proportional to the 4th power of the axle weight. So, if fixed costs like vehicle registration were proportional to the road damage, akin to a 'user pays' system, with a revenue-neutral adjustment to government income, car costs could be a tiny fraction of what is paid now and truck fees would be high enough for rail freight to be competitive. Currently, car owners subsidise road maintenance for truck owners, in contrast to rail where passenger usage is subsidised, so how can rail possibly compete?

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