

“Waiting for the next ship”: Road freight industry calls for efficient rail services through full Murray Basin Rail completion”

Road freight industry leaders in Northwest Victoria are calling on the Victorian and Federal Governments to fully complete the Murray Basin Rail Project, including the reinstatement of the rail corridor between Maryborough, Ballarat and Gheringhap.

Rail services not meeting exporter needs

During an ABC Rural Report interview aired on 7th May, Vince Cordoma, Managing Director of LRT/VCT Refrigerated Transport, described current rail services from north-west Victoria as **inadequate for modern export logistics**.

Mr Cordoma said the current rail configuration, which effectively limits Mildura corridor freight services to three trains per week, does not meet the needs of exporters operating in a highly time sensitive environment.

“We rely on roads and the truck network, but **we would like rail as well**,” Mr Cordoma told ABC Rural.

Mr Cordoma, **the largest road transporter of Sunraysia produce, said inadequate rail frequency was not just a transport issue, but a major export competitiveness issue for regional producers.**

He warned that **when rail services fail to align with shipping schedules**, exporters can miss vessel departures entirely, **meaning “the poor customer and the exporter, they’ve got to wait for the next ship” — adding delays, costs and uncertainty to an already demanding supply chain.**

During the interview, **Mr Cordoma said freight logistics is “going backwards” and that governments had failed to adequately plan for the daily freight demand.**

Deane Munro of Ouyen Inc said “Vince’s comments reflected what industry, transport operators and exporters across the Murray Basin Rail Network had been saying for years”.

The missing link; full completion of the Murray Basin Rail Project

“The freight task out of Mildura Council LGA and Sunraysia continues to grow rapidly, particularly with horticulture, grain and fodder exports, yet the rail network remains incomplete,” Deane Munro said.

“The direct rail route to port needs to be reinstated. This would significantly cut transit times and enable five or more intermodal train services per week from the region’s planned Sunraysia Mallee Port Link ”

“It is what major freight operators are asking for before they can seriously transition more freight from road to rail”

Vince Cordoma said **“the project was not simply about rail infrastructure, but about freight productivity, export competitiveness, road safety, emissions reduction and dealing with labour shortages and high fuel prices facing the transport industry”.**

Deane also highlighted the importance of the project for Victoria’s grain industry, including operations such as GrainFlow at Birchip. **The current network constraints have disrupted efficient daily grain train services into Geelong**, reducing flexibility for grain exporters and increasing truck movements on roads. **And they need two lots of rolling stock because the incomplete project has two different rail gauges.**

Completing the project will double the initial intended value.

Ouyen Inc.’s consultant Michael O’Callaghan said “the Murray Basin Rail Project had already received substantial public investment and argued that failing to complete the full standardisation has left the network operating well below its potential and none of the four Government objectives having been achieved”.

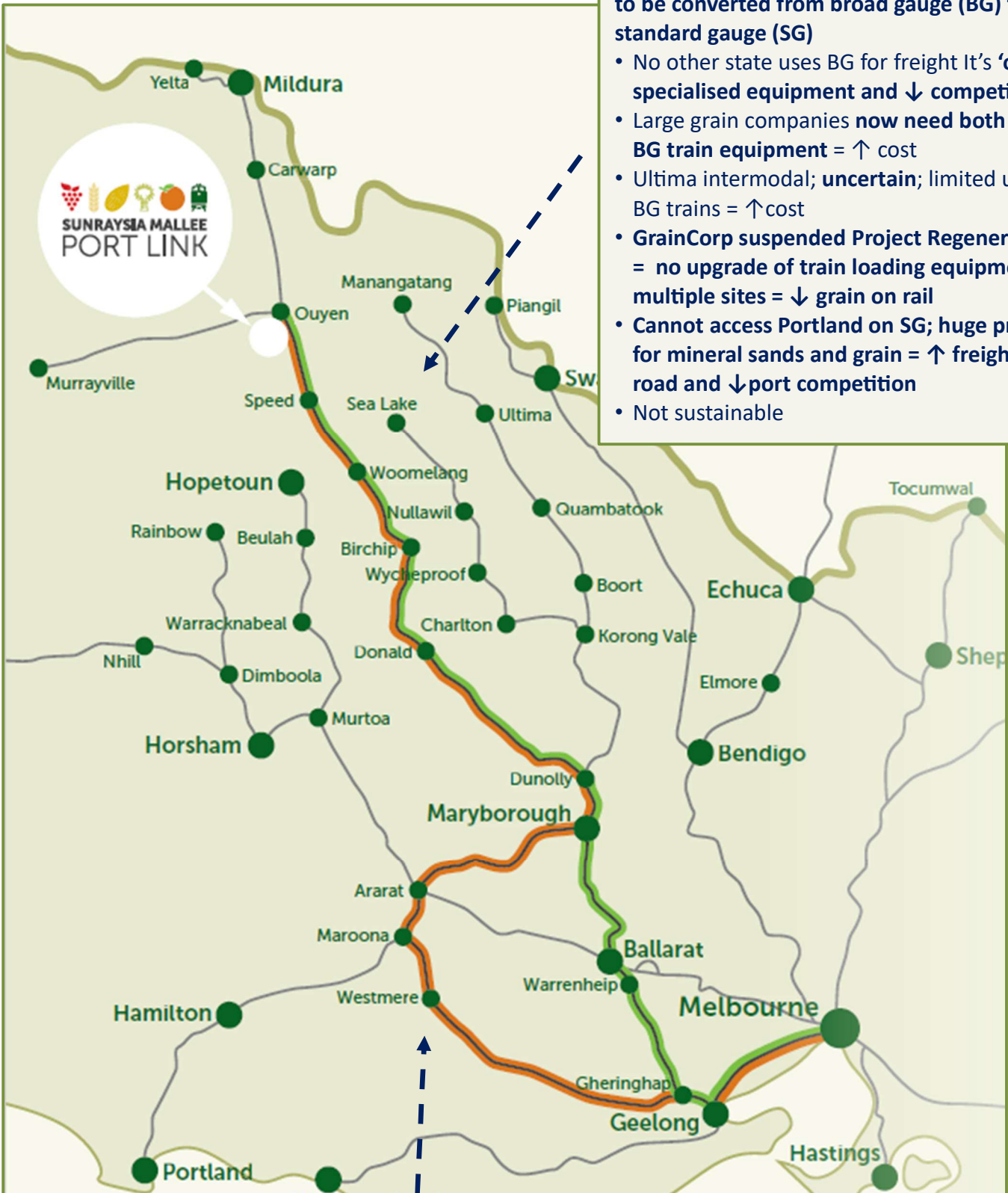
Today, the quantified volume of freight, including grain and intermodal, that could switch from road to rail, is nearing 1 million tonnes p.a., making it twice that used in the Benefit Cost Ratio justification of the project in the 2015 MBRP business case,” said Michael

The bottom line

Ouyen Inc and major road transport operators are urging all levels of government to work collaboratively with industry to deliver full standardisation and ensure the Murray Basin Freight Rail Network (MBFRN) can support the freight demands of a large area of regional Victoria “The limitations on the MBFRN are holding back both intermodal and bulk grain logistics which erodes our international competitiveness,” Deane Munro said.

Sea Lake & Manangatang lines were to be converted from broad gauge (BG) to standard gauge (SG)

- No other state uses BG for freight It's 'old' specialised equipment and ↓ competition
- Large grain companies now need both SG & BG train equipment = ↑ cost
- Ultima intermodal; uncertain; limited use of BG trains = ↑ cost
- GrainCorp suspended Project Regeneration = no upgrade of train loading equipment at multiple sites = ↓ grain on rail
- Cannot access Portland on SG; huge problem for mineral sands and grain = ↑ freight on road and ↓ port competition
- Not sustainable



Mildura & Murrayville rail corridors;

Not fully standardised. Trains no longer travel direct to port via Ballarat, instead they're detoured an extra 260 km round trip

- GrainCorp has suspended its ~ \$55 million Project Regeneration = No upgrade of train loading equipment at 4 sites = ↓ grain on rail & rail demise at 2 sites
- Birchip Grainflow, as an example, the detour has ↑ rail distance by 40%. No longer has efficient 24 hour train cycle to Geelong = ↑ grain on road
- Sunraysia Mallee Port Link is suspended. For Mildura RCC LGA and Sunraysia; '80% of 1+ million tonnes of intermodal freight will continue on road (GHD Advisory)
- No contingent route to any port during maintenance and emergencies e.g. Feb 2024 bush fires near Ararat, at least 4 trains stranded & others cancelled; eroding rails resilience
- Some mineral sand mining disincenitised