

15 December 2023

Submission in response to the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Introduction

The Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Commonwealth Government on the COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

For more than 20 years, ARTC's focus has been on facilitating the movement of people and freight across Australia, playing a critical role within the national supply chain. This was particularly critical and widely recognised during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the outset of the pandemic, the freight and transport industry was deemed an essential service by Australian governments. With demand for predictable and reliable deliveries of freight more important than ever, ARTC's people worked around the clock to help move critical supplies across the country to keep shelves stocked, maintain confidence in the delivery of our exports, and ensure Australia's supply chain remains intact.

The importance of an effective, resilient, unencumbered national supply chain in day-to-day life, as well as in times of national disruption, has never been as universally recognised as it is now. Noting the unprecedented circumstances in which the pandemic served, the actions taken by governments at both a Federal and State level, as well as by industry, must be acknowledged and viewed as valuable lessons that will enable greater preparedness in future crises or national disruption.

Furthermore, with the rapidly changing environment impacting permit systems, different border closures, sporadic lockdowns, and unclear definitions of what roles and industries were deemed 'essential', added significantly to the existing burdens that facilitates interoperability for rail operators and infrastructure managers.

Background

ARTC is proud of the vital role we play in Australia's transport supply chain and in the economic development of the nation. As one of the country's largest Rail Infrastructure Managers, ARTC maintains and operates 8,500km of the national rail network across five states, managing the transit of around 450 trains per day across New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

We employ more than 2,000 people and continue to invest in Australia's future prosperity and growth through the delivery of transport infrastructure projects which enhance the safety, reliability and efficiency of our rail network.

Each day our network transports intermodal containers, agricultural products, general freight and passenger services, as well as hundreds of thousands of tonnes of coal and minerals. We efficiently get freight off roads and reduce congestion, which improves our environment and increases the safety of motorists and local communities.

We continue to meet the changing needs of our customers and are committed to the health and safety of our people, the environment and the local communities in which we operate.

Initiatives undertaken during the pandemic:

ARTC actively worked with the Federal Government and health authorities throughout the duration of the pandemic to develop, implement and adhere to strict measures to protect the health and safety of our people and the local communities in which we operate, while ensuring the safe and effective operation of our rail network.

Some of the key initiatives undertaken as part of our response to the pandemic, included:

- Formation of a Pandemic Response Group and Crisis Management Team, including cross-business representation
- Participated in regular State and Federal Government briefings, specific to transport and supply chains (eg. Freight branch at TfNSW, WA all Government briefings etc)
- Engaged extensively with customers / rail operators to discuss the rapidly changing environment and the implementation of initiatives within ARTC
- Creation of an information hub for staff, as well as regular updates and support of our people throughout
- Activated business continuity plans and controls, including immediate measures to isolate critical areas such as our Network Control Centres and Asset teams to ensure continuity of critical services throughout the pandemic
- Adhered to all government and health advice regarding travel restrictions, border closures, social distancing, personal hygiene practices and working from home where it was practical to do so
- Developed and implemented a Workforce Recovery Strategy to anticipate issues and scenarios and help guide return-to-workforce decision making as government restrictions were lifted
- Employee survey was also undertaken to garner feedback about workplace changes in response to COVID-19.

Impact to ARTC:

ARTC saw increased challenges within our economic environment with the additional unique circumstances posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the non-coal segment, COVID-19 resulted in increased demand for a range of consumer staples leading to increased interstate freight volumes and revenue.

The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a substantial amount of work to be reprioritised and operationalised to ensure the safe and reliable movement of freight across Australia. Continuous adjustments were made to enable critical maintenance (such as rail track tamping, rail replacement, ballast renewal, compliance checks and other general track maintenance repairs required to keep the network operational) in a safe manner while also effectively supporting customers in the delivery of freight was an overarching priority.

As an essential service ARTC successfully mobilised and continued to deliver high volumes of freight across the country with no significant outages or shutdowns due to COVID-19.

Importance of a resilient and interoperable supply chain:

Ensuring effective and resilient rail infrastructure is one of ARTC's core responsibilities and essential to ensuring a robust and reliable supply chain network. Throughout the pandemic, it was imperative that Australia's rail network remained open for business to ensure customers and communities around the country were able to access food, medicine and other essential items in a timely manner.

ARTC advocates for greater freight being moved on rail, and in order to maximise modal shift opportunities, it is critical that freight supply chains provide reliable and resilient service capabilities. The resilience of supply chain networks, including those of ARTC, which has been significantly impacted by adverse weather events, will enable secure operations that will build on our international competitiveness in meeting the demand of domestic and global economies.

Additionally, the challenges faced by rail operators and rail infrastructure managers throughout the pandemic significantly exacerbated the existing issues associated with the lack of rail interoperability (i.e. consistency between rail systems, networks and jurisdictions, as well as aligned training and accreditation for rail workers). Following the decision by Australian governments to focus on rail interoperability as a National Cabinet priority, ARTC has prioritised supporting the resolution of this constraint by working closely with the National Transport Commission and state jurisdictions on developing a truly efficient national rail network that effectively facilitates each operator, regulator and rail infrastructure manager interacting with the other optimally.

Challenges faced by ARTC & pandemic preparedness considerations:

Essential workers

During the pandemic, States and Territories released varying lists of roles that were considered 'essential', which allowed individuals to leave their homes during lockdown periods to undertake urgent / key work essential for safety, repairs and to maintain essential services and supplies to the community.

Most states divided the essential services and workers into eight general categories, including emergency service workers, food service workers, utility workers, public workers, education and social care workers, broadcasting (media and telecommunications) workers and transport and logistics workers.

It was clear from the early stages of the pandemic that Network Controllers were considered essential workers, however it was not as clear for many of ARTC's other staff that were key to running and maintaining the rail network. The category of 'Transport and Logistic Workers' enabled the many Network Controllers employed by ARTC to run our Interstate and Hunter Valley networks to leave home and attend the control centres to undertake their work. However, there was a level of ambiguity to this category that varied between the different State Governments that did not immediately or intuitively apply to other key roles such as provisioning centre staff, specialist rail engineers and other track maintainers.

Considering this, it is recommended that the Commonwealth Government lead the development of a pre-populated list of all essential roles with a level of detail that leaves little room for misinterpretation. This list should be shared with industry for consultation before finalisation and applied in future crisis / national disruption scenarios.

Essential industries

As stated by the Law Council of Australia's COVID-19: Essential Services and Workers fact sheet ([link](#)), the Commonwealth Government does not maintain a public, agreed definition of 'essential services' or 'essential workplaces'. Both of these terms were described rather than defined, derived from the measures implemented by the National Cabinet, being the Prime Minister, the Premiers of the States and the Chief Ministers of the Territories.

During the early stages of the pandemic, the construction industry was unable to operate due to many States and Territories considering it not essential. This posed several challenges for ARTC as we were constructing several sections of new rail track.

The broad categorisation of 'construction' led to confusion on the continuity of infrastructure projects essential to stimulating and growing the economy, especially during events (e.g. pandemic) that stifle

economic activity. In particular, significant challenges were faced when initial works were being undertaken in the construction on the brownfield sections of our network, including the Botany Rail Duplication (BRD) near Sydney Airport and the Cabramatta Loop Project (CLP) in Western Sydney. Additionally, we also experienced challenges commissioning a major rail project (the \$235 million North East Rail Line Project in Victoria), when we required skilled interstate workers to go to Victoria to undertake critical signalling and commissioning works.

As a result, ARTC recommends the Commonwealth Government develop a national definition of what is considered 'essential services' and 'essential workplaces', including with regards to 'construction' activities, to allow industry to fully understand their responsibilities and effectively plan in times of future crises or pandemics.

Inter-state permit systems

Widespread closures of State borders resulted in extremely challenging situations for all Australians during the pandemic. Each State and Territory Government issued their own requirements and permit systems / application processes which were often confusing and ambiguous.

ARTC had multiple dedicated corporate support staff members allocated to navigating the various application / permit systems that differed between each state, to apply for permits for essential rail track maintenance staff and contractors who were required to cross borders as part of their work.

It became a challenge for ARTC as the permit system was not always understood by State Police who were reviewing the permits at the border crossings, which meant that if a Policy member did not think the person who held the permit was 'essential', they could refuse entry or send them to hotel quarantine. There was a lack of understanding, coordination, governance and consistency in this process between various State Governments and their Police forces and resulted in some staff being forced into hotel quarantine incorrectly and key rail work not being completed in time.

It is recommended that the Commonwealth Government consider a national permit solution for any future border closures that is agreed to by all States and Territories. This would ensure a consistent approach and greater understanding for those applying for them, as well as those who are responsible for granting or assessing them.

Vaccination requirements

Vaccination requirements throughout the pandemic were sporadic and inconsistent between States and Territories. Noting this was largely due to the initial limited supply and prioritisation requirements, ARTC recommends the Commonwealth Government develop a best practice framework or guideline that provides appropriate steps and governance to distributing vaccinations in future potential pandemics.

Additionally, ARTC faced significant challenges in gaining access for staff members based in regional locations gaining access to vaccinations in the early stages of the vaccination rollout due to geographical constraints. Consideration should be given to how future vaccinations or required medicine is distributed more evenly between regional and metropolitan locations.

Access to testing

Similar to the access issues associated with vaccinations in the early stages of the pandemic, access to adequate testing was a challenge for ARTC. It is recommended that where possible and when appropriate, the Commonwealth Government make early purchases of testing apparatuses and prioritise access of these tests to essential workers and industries.

Recommendations Summary:

1. ARTC recommends that the Commonwealth Government develop a pre-populated list of all essential roles with a level of detail that leaves little room for misinterpretation. This list should be shared with industry for consultation before finalisation and applied in future crisis / national disruption scenarios.
2. As a result, ARTC recommends the Commonwealth Government develop a national definition of what is considered 'essential services' and 'essential workplaces', including with regards to 'construction' activities, to allow industry to fully understand their responsibilities and effectively plan in times of future crises or pandemics.
3. ARTC recommends that the Commonwealth Government consider a national permit solution for any future border closures that is agreed to by all States and Territories. This would ensure a consistent approach and greater understanding for those applying for them, as well as those who are responsible for granting or assessing them.
4. ARTC recommends the Commonwealth Government develop a best practice framework or guideline that provides appropriate steps and governance to distributing vaccinations in future potential pandemics.
5. ARTC recommends that where possible and appropriate, the Commonwealth Government make early purchases of testing apparatuses and prioritise access of these tests to essential workers and industries.