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ARTC plans to ease Liverpool Ranges rail bottleneck

The Australian Rail Track Corporation has finalised plans to remove the rail bottleneck over the Liverpool Ranges and unlock the total energy resources of the Gunnedah Basin.

Extensive studies examined a series of alternative alignments, including three with major tunnels and others on the surface.

Analysis compared the costs and benefits of all options against duplication of the existing alignment and the conclusion reached was that duplication of the existing track was the preferred option.

The first phase of the project would be the construction of two independent passing loops at an estimated cost of \$34 million. Based on 2011 dollars, the total cost of the planned duplication would be \$250 million bringing the total investment to \$284 million.

ARTC CEO, John Fullerton, said today removal of the bottleneck was vital to meet the rail track provider's philosophy of ensuring track capacity was ahead of producer and export demands for coal through the Port of Newcastle.

"Currently the Gunnedah Basin produces 6 million tonnes of coal, which is transported over the Liverpool Ranges for export through Newcastle," Mr Fullerton said.

"With industry and export projections forecast to grow to around 50 million tonnes by 2020, the current track configuration over the Liverpool Ranges just can't meet demand.

"A pinch point in one section of the export coal chain inhibits overall capacity of the entire chain.

"If the pinch point remains, capacity can't grow and market demands can't be met," Mr Fullerton said.

Further down the coal chain ARTC has, and is, building a third track between Whittingham (near Singleton) and Maitland, a third track on the Nundah Bank near Camberwell as well as passing loops and signal upgrades right along the network.



"All the work will increase the overall capacity of the track and meet the growing demand for Hunter Valley coal," Mr Fullerton said.

The bottleneck over the Liverpool Ranges is the result of a single track with steep grades and a short tunnel at the peak at Ardglen.

"The steep grade reduces capacity by limiting tonnages trains can carry," Mr Fullerton said.

ARTC has been working with the coal industry, and in particular the producers based in the Gunnedah Basin, to remove the bottleneck and increase track capacity in line with production and export forecasts.

One important aspect of the duplication option was that it could be staged, allowing track capacity to be in line with mine and export growth from the Gunnedah Basin.

"By constructing a parallel track in stages, ARTC will meet all confirmed and likely demand for the next 10 to 15 years from the Gunnedah Basin," Mr Fullerton said.

During ARTC's studies and analyses, coal producers (existing and prospective), rail operators and other participants in the Hunter Valley coal chain were consulted.

"Overall, all stakeholders support the decision ARTC has made," Mr Fullerton said.

However, he added, two of the six identified alternative alignments would be retained in the event long-term demand required reconsideration of the options.

"This really sets up development in the Gunnedah Basin and ARTC is in a position where some work will commence immediately," he said.

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