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The trucking industry wants the government to close down its more efficient rival: rail

The New Zealand government must ignore the trucking industry's attempt to close down inter-island rail freight, says the car review website [dogandlemon.com](#). [Dogandlemon.com](#) editor Clive Matthew-Wilson, who is an outspoken road safety campaigner, says:

"The government's independent advisory group [has recommended](#) that the new ferries be smaller than the proposed iRex ferries and not be rail-enabled. My sources tell me this recommendation was driven by the trucking industry, in order to make a large percentage of rail freight effectively uneconomic.[\[1\]](#)

"The new ferries will be designed so that trucks will be able to drive straight on and straight off. If rail freight can't work the same way, it will be impossible for rail to compete with trucks. But that's exactly what a large section of the trucking industry wants: they want to close down most rail freight. The trucking industry knows that, once rail freight can't be shipped economically cross the Picton Strait, this will be an almost fatal blow to what's left of the national rail freight network. Once the inter-island rail link is broken, it will be much, much harder for future governments to restore it."[\[2\]](#)

"It's impossible to over-emphasise the importance of rail freight. We already know from our experiences after the [Kaikoura earthquake](#) that [freight trucks simply couldn't cope](#)."[\[3\]](#)

"We also know that, if all of the current rail freight is moved onto the road, this will mean hundreds of extra trucks a day going through small South Island towns. These extra trucks will mean many more avoidable road deaths." [4]

"Nearly 20% of the road toll involves trucks. In 2022 there were 51 fatal truck crashes, 166 serious injury crashes, and 539 minor injury crashes. In these crashes, 62 people died, 208 people were seriously injured, and 727 people suffered minor injuries. Less rail freight means more trucks on our roads. More trucks on our roads means more dead bodies; it's as simple as that."

"Just as bad is the potential for life-threatening problems following a natural disaster; an efficient rail freight system gives a 'Plan B' in the event of a major storm or earthquake. Without efficient rail ferries there will soon be almost no rail freight between the two main islands. Without rail freight, there will be no easy way to speedily carry freight down the South Island in the event of a natural disaster blocking the main highways."

"For years, the trucking industry has been selling the lie that rail is uneconomic while trucks are far more efficient. Actually, the opposite is true. The only reason that the trucking industry is profitable is because it's effectively sponsored by the taxpayer."

Multiple studies have shown that rail is also vastly more energy-efficient and produces far less emissions than trucks.[5]

"Want to know why our roads are in such poor condition? Blame the trucking industry."

"About two thirds of the cost of building new highways goes into making them strong enough for large vehicles, which are mainly trucks. Excluding events such as storm damage, about 80% of all road maintenance costs are the result of the damage caused by trucks."

"Yet, the trucking industry pays less than a quarter of the costs of building and maintaining these highways."

What pays for state highways?

Light road user charges (RUC) and petrol tax: 72%

Heavy road user charges (RUC): 23%

Vehicle licensing: 5%

This is a 2017 statistic that is still generally correct but does not include some major government expenditures such as the emergency finance in response to the 2023 catastrophic failure of State Highway 25A following storm damage. [7]

Matthew-Wilson says the government should make the trucking industry pay the full costs of the damage they cause and the full costs of building roads in the first place.

“I urge the government to ignore the trucking industry’s bullshit about being more efficient. [The government’s own studies show that rail freight is at least twice as efficient as road freight.](#)”

“Moving freight by sea is also many times more efficient than trucks. The only reason that trucking companies prosper is because they don’t pay the true costs of the roads they travel down.”

“We need milk tankers and delivery trucks. We don’t need most of the longhaul truck-and-trailer units that roar down our state highways.”

“Truck drivers are not the enemy here. The enemy is a cosy historical arrangement between the trucking industry and the government, which allows the trucking companies to grow rich at the taxpayers’ expense.”[\[6\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Also, [it’s been claimed](#) that the all-up cost of the new ferries could be up to \$1.2 billion – more than double the \$551 million cost of the vessels for the cancelled iRex project. However, it must be pointed out that the main heavy costs of the previous project were not in the ferries but in the infrastructure associated with the ferries.

“The issue is not the cost of the ferries. The cost explosion has come from the dockside improvements needed to handle an increase in freight and passengers.”

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/why-regulation-is-the-real-problem-behind-the-high-cost-of-the-interisland-rail-ferries-richard-prebble/ATLO657SSVG7THNHGF6KYDKJQM/>

[\[2\]](#) Efficient train ferries are ‘roll-on, roll-off’: that is, complete trains except locomotives are driven directly into one end of the ferry at the beginning of the trip and out the other end when the destination is reached.

The proposed new ferries would still be able to carry rail freight, but only by unloading the freight from the trains and then loading and unloading the freight in and out of the ferry, then back onto trains at the other end. This is a vastly less efficient system and effectively makes rail freight uneconomic.

So, if trucks use the ‘roll-on, roll-off’ system while rail can’t use ‘roll-on, roll-off’, trucks are effectively gifted a massively unfair advantage.

[\[3\]](#) Pre-earthquake, the South Island rail network was [carrying around 1 million tonnes](#) of freight annually. Post-earthquake, the immediate challenge was diverting drivers from the closed SH1 between Christchurch and Picton to the alternate route along State Highways 63, 6, 65 and 7 (and the alpine Lewis Pass). These roads are narrow and winding in places, with single-lane bridges and an alpine pass, which can be treacherous when wet and during the winter months. Vehicle numbers on this route quickly rose four-fold to 4500 vehicles per day, with 1000 of these being heavy vehicles, up from the 350 pre-earthquake. <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/projects/kaikoura-earthquake->

[response/moving-mountains/the-challenge-restoring-road-and-rail-routes-and-a-marina/](#)

[4] Don Braid, CEO of Mainfreight, said that the company “...is “unsettled” by the “fiasco” around the future of the Cook Strait rail ferry services and rail service south of the Waikato” and that “the loss of rail services between the North and South Islands would result in Mainfreight adding 5700 more truck and trailer journeys a year”.

<https://wellington.scoop.co.nz/?p=161804>

[5] Coastal shipping produces one fifth of the carbon emissions (well-to-wheel) of road freight. Rail produces about a quarter of trucking emissions. [https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/content/dam/uoc-main-site/documents/pdfs/reports/data interaction report 24 03 2023 FINAL.pdf](https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/content/dam/uoc-main-site/documents/pdfs/reports/data%20interaction%20report%2024%2003%202023%20FINAL.pdf)

[6] The trucking industry doesn’t want to entirely eliminate rail freight; trucking companies such as Mainfreight make extensive use of the rail system. However, the trucking industry as a whole wants rail freight to be a healthy dwarf that can carry freight for trucking companies but can’t effectively compete with freight trucks, because the system is rigged in favour of trucks.

[7] About three-quarters of the funding supporting the expenditure on managing and developing the roading network comes from Waka Kotahi, using the revenues mainly collected from road users through fuel excise duty, road user charges and vehicle licence fees. A further 20% comes from local authorities. The Crown also directly provides a small part of the total, much of which in 2018/19 related to the payments for the Kaikoura earthquake response and so would vary from year to year.

<https://www.transport.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/DTCC-Main-Report-June-2023.pdf>

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