

PM with Mark Colvin

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Railway in poor condition

Matt Peacock reported this story on [Friday, August 26, 2011 18:10:00](#)

BRENDAN TREMBATH: A prominent railway consultant has broken his silence over the poor state of Australia's busiest railway line between Melbourne and Sydney. Near accidents in recent weeks have prompted a federal safety inquiry.

Unions say the line's been wrecked by a bungled billion-dollar program to replace sleepers, which has turned the rail bed to mud. Now, an engineer who warned the Government's Rail Track Corporation against the plan, says it could cost up to half a billion dollars to fix.

Matt Peacock reports.

MATT PEACOCK: Federal Transport Minister, Anthony Albanese's, quiet announcement last week of the second inquiry within six months into the state of the country's busiest rail line linking Melbourne and Sydney surprised most rail industry insiders.

The line has been plagued with mud holes, caused, say critics of its operator, the Australian Rail Track Corporation, or ARTC, by a bungled billion-dollar re-sleeper program.

Unlike this year's earlier inquiry, which was conducted by the ARTC's own consultant and ended up praising the corporation, this inquiry is the first of its kind to be conducted by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau and its chief commissioner, Martin Dolan, says he half-expected the reference.

MARTIN DOLAN: It wasn't a surprise. We've obviously been aware both of a range of occurrences relating to safe operation on the track and the public concern about safety. So we were expecting somewhere along the line we might have to turn our attention to more systemic issues relating to this.

MATT PEACOCK: The most recent incident on the main south line occurred a fortnight ago on the outskirts of Melbourne, when the XPT inter-capital passenger express hit a huge mud hole so hard it broke the giant coupling pin on the front engine car, cutting power and forcing passengers to travel to Sydney by bus. Just two weeks before, a packed V-line passenger train narrowly missed a maintenance crew mending rail north of Seymour where the mud hole problem is particularly bad.

BOB NANVA: It's unbelievable that it's taken so many high risk incidents to occur in such close succession, for someone to realise the absurdity of the situation and do something about it, particularly when you've had drivers and other independent experts, outside of the union, telling the ARTC that the techniques they have used have problems. And we're seeing those problems through these mud holes that occur time and time again.

MATT PEACOCK: The inquiry must look at the root cause of the mud holes, says Rail Union president, Bob Nanva, which he blames on the ARTC's controversial resleeper, done cheaply by sliding concrete sleepers under the track from the side, rather than with a tracklaying machine.

BOB NANVA: They will really need to look at the side insertion technique that's been adopted by the ARTC which we have described often as a cheap and nasty way of doing business

MATT PEACOCK: It's a view shared by the Victorian Transport Minister, Terry Mulder, who as far back as last July unsuccessfully sought an inquiry into the ARTC.

TERRY MULDER: It should have been do it first, do it properly and make sure we get value for money, and unfortunately that just hasn't happened

MATT PEACOCK: Commissioner Dolan says he will be investigating whether side insertion has aggravated the mud holes.

MARTIN DOLAN: We will certainly have to establish from our independent perspective and based on evidence what has caused the mud holes, what's caused the overall problems with the track. But otherwise we won't be able to answer the long-term question which is, what is the permanent fix to the safety problems on the track?

MATT PEACOCK: Now, a prominent railway engineering consultant asked to advise the ARTC consortium on the best way to lay the sleepers has broken his silence.

JIM MATIJASEVICH: I think something needs to be said so that we don't make the same mistakes in the future

MATT PEACOCK: In his August 2007 report, Jim Matijasevich says he was told that the ARTC had instructed the resleepering consortium that "the object was to get the sleepers in at the cheapest price without consideration of the ramifications".

Nonetheless, he strongly recommended against side insertion, warning prophetically that if it were used "within a short period major work will be required on the new concrete sleepers and the introduction of new ballast will be needed".

JIM MATIJASEVICH: And the information given to me, was slightly cheaper to have side insertion. But I advised them in the report that they would have short and long-term problems if they went for side insertion.

MATT PEACOCK: The ARTC and its consultant's report earlier this year claim side insertion is common practice elsewhere for this work. An assertion Jim Matijasevic flatly rejects, and the sledding, shoulder cleaning and other techniques now being used to fix the track he describes as "bandaid solutions". To fix it properly could cost up to half a billion dollars.

JIM MATIJASEVICH: Without seeing the extent of it, I can't comment on the full amount. But if you're looking to repair kilometre by kilometre of bad formation with drainage and what have you, and ballast cleaning, you could be looking at \$1 million a kilometre.

MATT PEACOCK: And the controversial resleepering is continuing, with reports already of fresh mud holes appearing on the western line to Broken Hill.

The union's Bob Nanva says enough is enough.

BOB NANVA: We have real concerns that these issues are going to replicate themselves all across Australia, throughout Parkes, Broken Hill, if this investigation doesn't nip the problem in the bud.

MATT PEACOCK: But with Commissioner Dolan's report not expected within a year, by then the damage could already be done.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: Matt Peacock reporting.

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