Berejiklian & Barilaro bring added backing to essential rail freight services

Australia's rail freight sector has applauded the Berejiklian-Barilaro government for elevating the priority of essential freight train services on the Sydney rail network during the coronavirus pandemic.

Freight on Rail Group (FORG) of Australia Chair Dean Dalla Valle said the haulage of essential goods, supplies and commodities to depots, terminals and ports across the state was critical to help bolster the NSW economy and protect local jobs.

"Freeing up extra paths on Sydney's rail network, notably for goods trains, is a smart, quick and cost-efficient way to help support and amplify critical freight activity in the economy.

"It means freight trains can access more paths during peak morning and afternoon periods, which normally would not be available, to better service the transport supply chain," he said.

Typically, freight trains cannot operate on the Sydney rail network between the peak commuter periods of 6am-10am and 3pm-7pm. Furthermore, access is limited on both sides of these peak periods, resulting in only 10 hours of 'non-peak' access for freight trains.

Mr Dalla Valle said a lot of people don't realise many daily freight train services have to weave through the busy Sydney network to deliver vital supplies, raw materials and commodities to destinations like the ports of Botany, Kembla and Newcastle.

"For example, each day thousands of import and export shipping containers arriving or leaving Port Botany pass through key rail depots and terminals at Chullora, Enfield, Minto, Cooks River and Moorebank.

"Similarly, goods trains running between Sydney and Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth have to be threaded through the Flemington rail junction – rail's equivalent of passing through the eye of a national logistics needle.

"Likewise, grain originating from central west NSW to be converted into food and industrial ingredients like flour, starch and ethanol at Manildra Group's Nowra facility is hauled via the Flemington junction to eventually join the South Coast-Illawarra railway line," he said.

Not only a major fuel for light vehicles (E10), ethanol is the key ingredient of critically required hand sanitiser.

Mr Dalla Valle said every unit hauled is another unit delivered to critical domestic and international markets, helping to preserve Australian jobs and generate export revenue for both the state and nation.

"We are in the eye of a three-to-four generational event and not only do we have to help flatten the curve, we have to get ahead of the curve to sustain our economy," he said.

Mr Dalla Valle said during the coronavirus crisis Australia needs to be brilliant at the basics.

"Every grocery item delivered to a supermarket, every batch of medical supplies made available to hospitals, every tonne of grain delivered to a flour mill or ethanol plant, every tonne of coking coal delivered to a steel mill, or every tonne of thermal coal delivered to a power station to provide baseload electricity to Australian cities and towns – all this counts.

"Unit by unit, item by item, tonne by tonne – this is how we help shield our economy over the coming months.

"Economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic will benefit greatly from essential rail freight services having greater access in the future to the Sydney Trains' network," he said.

Mr Dalla Valle said a smooth and cost-efficient national freight supply chain tended to be 'out of sight' and hence 'out of mind' of most Australians.

"Our proud sector helps underpin a vital and finely tuned component of our economy. If we don't plug away 24/7, 365 days of the year, rain, hail or shine then the arteries of our economic trade will quickly clog up," he said.

Transport for NSW Freight Access & Performance unit and the Rail Operations Centre (ROC) were instrumental in the initiative to elevate priority of freight train services on the network.

Mr Dalla Valle said a 1,000-metre intermodal goods train can haul approximately 160 shipping containers, helping to free-up hundreds of truck drivers each week to focus on delivering goods and products the remaining 'last mile' from warehouses to stores where consumers need shelves restocked.

"To put this in perspective, a shipping container can hold approximately 25,000 rolls of toilet paper, 55,000 cans of tinned food, 1,500 cases of beer or 900 boxes of bananas," he said.

Mr Dalla Valle said without freight trains, bulk exports like grain, meat, fresh and dry produce, cotton and coal cannot be efficiently hauled to ports, the gateways to global markets.

"Paddock to port, pit to port, or manufacturing plant to port – essential rail freight services stretch across state borders, servicing supply chains across our continent," he said.

In recent weeks, rail freight operators have implemented strict hygiene protocols at depots, terminals and maintenance facilities, including social distancing.

Mr Dalla Valle said in line with government guidelines and health plans, rail freight operators are ensuring appropriate measures are followed before any essential worker crosses a border or travels between regions within a state to ensure there is little risk of coronavirus transmission.

"Rail freight also has the added benefit of operating within railway corridors and depots prohibited to the public," he said.

About Freight on Rail Group (FORG) of Australia

FORG consists of the nine major rail freight businesses in Australia: Pacific National, Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC), One Rail Australia, Aurizon, Qube Holdings, SCT Logistics, Arc Infrastructure, WatCo Australia and Southern Shorthaul Railroad (SSR).

These rail freight companies employ more than 20,000 workers across Australia (including railway construction and maintenance workers), contribute more than $11 billion each year to the nation's economy, employ 20,000 people (many based in regional Australia), operate in every Australian state and territory (except Tasmania), utilise 1,600 locomotives and 34,000 wagons, and manage and operate 23,000 kilometres of rail track.