

Cairns to Northern Tablelands Access Strategy - Summary

October 2021

The transport corridors between Cairns and the Northern Tablelands provide vital links for the community and freight. The corridors pass through World Heritage listed rainforests and difficult terrain creating challenges for connectivity and efficiency.

The Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR) has completed a comprehensive planning study into the four transport corridors linking Cairns to the Northern Tablelands. The study has investigated the current issues and future needs and determined fit-for-purpose solutions to improve performance and meet customer needs.

What did we learn?

Regular road closures related to weather events and traffic crashes have significant impacts on the reliability of the corridors causing delays to motorists.

Travel reliability and driver experience is also a key challenge. The interaction between heavy vehicles and general traffic on the existing constrained corridors creates few opportunities for overtaking.

The *Cairns to Northern Tablelands Access Strategy* (the Access Strategy) has identified the major challenges for the corridors being:

- network resilience
- travel reliability
- freight access.

The planning study found that while there are clear challenges with each corridor, none of the existing corridors are operating at capacity.

Traffic analysis indicates 93 per cent of travel movements on the Kuranda Range are within two minutes of the expected travel time.

On average, travel duration (light vehicles) is extended by 30 to 40 seconds throughout the day due to the presence of slower moving heavy vehicles.

Image: Rex Lookout, Captain Cook Highway

Did you know?



Between 2015–2019
there were
43 days
where multiple range
roads were closed on
the same day



There have been
19 times
when both the
Kennedy Highway
(Cairns – Mareeba)
and Gillies Range Road
were closed on the
same day



What can we do?

The Access Strategy sets out a clear roadmap of short and medium-term actions and operational improvements that can improve connectivity and reliability of the corridors.

The Access Strategy also lays out the next steps for future planning of an alternative corridor in the long-term once capacity of the existing corridors is reached.

Road link	Average annual frequency of closure	Average duration of closures	Average proportion of time closed annually
Mossman – Mt Molloy Road	8 closures	47 hours	4%
Kennedy Highway: Kuranda Range Road	44 closures	6.6 hours	3%
Kennedy Highway: Kuranda – Mareeba	10 closures	8.9 hours	1%
Gillies Range Road	17 closures	5.3 hours	1%
Palmerston Highway (Innisfail – Ravenshoe)	9 closures	14 hours	2%

Map



Key short and medium-term actions

The Access Strategy outlines a comprehensive list of 60 short and medium-term actions spread across 13 functional areas.

Key actions include:

1. Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) to provide real-time information improving response times to incidents and closures as well as informing motorists on expected travel times and closures. Internationally, ITS solutions are being successfully implemented to improve trip reliability and safety.
2. Investigate the feasibility of Rapid Response Teams to clear closures and reduce impacts on travel time and reliability of the corridors.
3. Infrastructure upgrades for resilience and safety to reduce impacts and the number and duration of closures from weather events and vehicle incidents.



Artist's impression: Proposed ITS station on Kuranda Range Road.

Planning for the long-term

Current modelling indicates that with natural growth rates traffic volumes on the Kuranda Range Road will not reach the threshold for major upgrades until 2051.

Major development on the tablelands could increase growth rates and bring forward the need for major capacity upgrades.

While currently not needed, actions can be taken to progress towards planning for an alternative alignment in the long-term including:

- Engagement with other government departments to develop a robust methodology to monetise or cost lost investment opportunity within economic analysis.
- Undertake a network impact assessment to determine and evaluate impacts to the broader network of new alignments and transport movements.
- Once assessment of new corridor options is completed, undertake options analysis for corridor preservation of the preferred alignment.

The Cairns to Northern Tablelands Access Strategy provides a comprehensive roadmap of initiatives and investment over the short, medium and long-term to deliver the right infrastructure at the right time.

Is the Bridle Track an option?

While detailed assessment of any alignment, including the Bridle Track, has not been undertaken, a strategic review of the proposal identified the following issues:

- Adverse impacts to amenity and liveability outcomes in Redlynch Valley.
- Adverse impacts to the urban road network, including the potential to exacerbate congestion issues on the Cairns Western Arterial Road.
- Inefficient connection to major freight hubs, given the distance between the planned end point and locations such as the sea port, commercial precinct, airport and state development area.

Map

