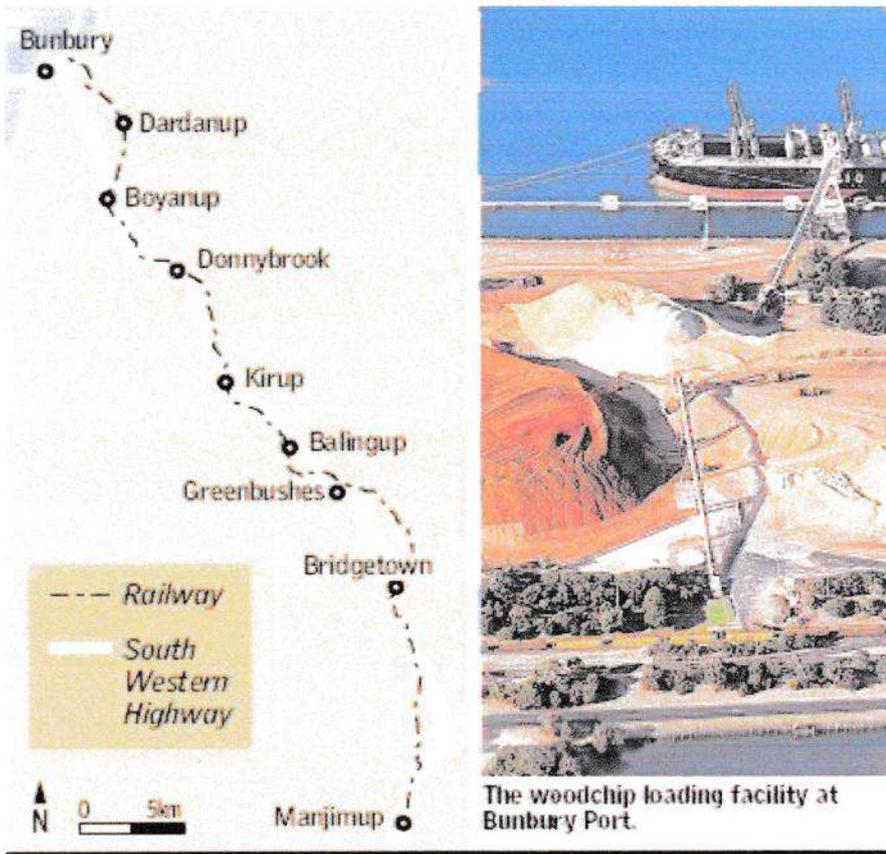


Traffic nightmare looms in SW as rail line closes

The real impact of the closure of a South-West rail line will be felt on the roads. Suellen Jerrard reports

ROAD VERSUS RAIL



A major railway line in the South-West has closed indefinitely, raising concerns that an increasing number of heavy haulage trucks will cause chaos on roads in the region.

The 150km stretch of line from Manjimup to Bunbury closed this month when its last customer, WA Plantation Resources, ruled it was no longer economical to continue transporting logs and woodchips by rail.

It is hoped half of the railway line, between Greenbushes and Bunbury, will be reopened by the end of the year under a \$20 million upgrade deal between the State Government, WAPRES and rail operator West-Net.

However, the deal is dependent on a proposed \$12 million woodchip mill at the Bunbury port being approved.

WAPRES general manager Ian Telfer said that without the Bunbury mill, the economics of rail did not stack up and the company would

continue to use at least 72 road trains every day to transport its product.

Mr Telfer said that number would grow as the plantation timber industry expanded.

The company's plantation timber woodchip exports doubled in the last four years and are expected to rise another 20 per cent in the next few years.

Main Roads regional manager Brett Bellstead said the operation of big trucks on the South Western Highway had increased up to 75 per cent in six months — with between 2000 and 4500 vehicles travelling between Bridgetown and Bunbury each day.

But Mr Bellstead said the highway met required standards and traffic volumes would have to reach around 10,000 vehicles a day before a dual carriageway was warranted.

The Donnybrook-Balingup, Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Manjimup chambers of commerce said the amount of heavy haulage traffic

on the region's roads was a recipe for disaster and urgent action was needed.

Spokesman Mark Manea said the rail line should never have been allowed to close and instead all parties should be working hard to get heavy haulage freight on rail.

WestNet Rail commercial manager Paul Larsen said the priority was to ensure the railway stayed opened and the focus would then switch to attracting more customers.

“We started work two years ago,” Mr Larsen said. “The volumes could have got to the level where the whole railway could have shut and we didn't want that.”

Planning and Infrastructure Department strategic policy analyst Roy Johnson said considerable work had gone into getting the best outcome for the South-West rail network, which struggled to remain economical given the wide spectrum of general freight transported through the region.

The line was once used for passengers and general freight but only woodchips have been transported for the last 20 years.

**'The volumes could have got to the level where the whole railway could have shut
and we didn't want that.'**

PAUL LARSEN — WESTNET RAIL