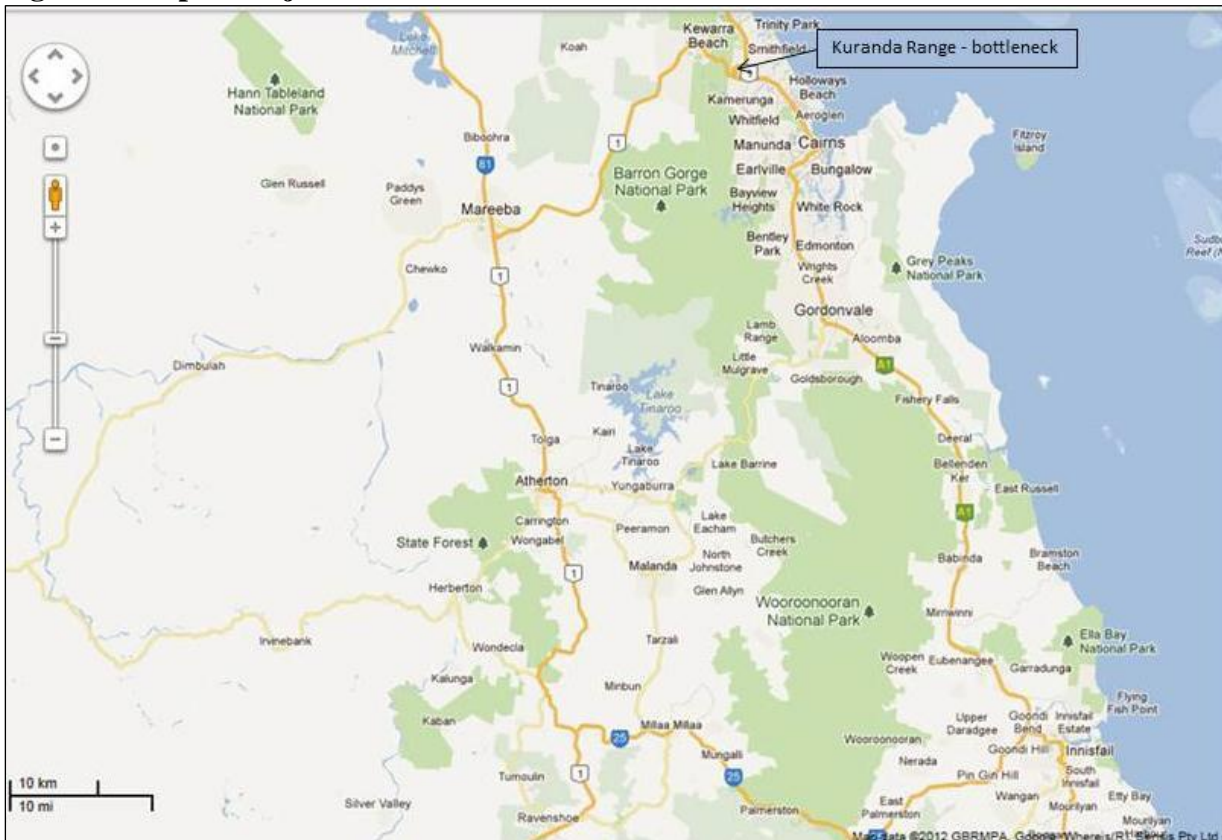


Tablelands Transport Issues

Tablelands Industry Workforce Group Inc. is part of a Transport Infrastructure Group and, together with the Mareeba Chamber of Commerce, was instrumental in the formation of this group in early 2012. The lack of suitable transport links is seen as an impediment to economic growth. Poor road infrastructure limits expansion, access to markets, employment and job creation. Better road infrastructure would result in larger Industry in Mareeba and Atherton. The FNQ Regional Plan 2031 does not include any provision for upgrades to the Kuranda Range Road.

The Kuranda Range Road, the main access route from Cairns to the Tablelands, is not currently suitable for B-Doubles. Trailers must be unhitched before travelling across the range. This significantly increases freight cost. The Tablelands is a smaller freight destination than Cairns and 'out of way' - so we need to 'connect' ourselves to the main route from Cairns via Mareeba back down south either via the Coast (Bruce Hwy) or an inland access route via Mt Garnet, Greenvale, Charters Towers. Only the Kuranda Range Road does this without doubling back on itself. Many transport companies choose to leave Cairns empty travelling south and pick up a load on the way to southern markets and Ports. Currently crossing the Kuranda Range to pick up produce is an estimated 7 additional hours when taking into account the hitching and unhitching of trailers. If operators were able to access the Tablelands via Kuranda Range Road - this would reduce transport costs. Negotiations are continuing in regards to an unhitching pad at Koah which will potentially reduce this timeframe, however the Mareeba and District Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association have indicated that this will not reduce the turnaround time sufficiently enough to entice transport companies to travel up the Kuranda Range Road.

Figure 1. Map of Major Tablelands Routes



Courtesy of Google Maps

There is a belief that the Palmerston Highway offers a suitable B- Double alternative to upgrading the Kuranda Range. It is unrealistic to expect transport companies to make the 5 hour trip from Cairns to Mareeba via this route. Anecdotal evidence suggests that transport companies prefer to leave Cairns empty. Bill Cummings (Cummings Research) addressed a Mining Expo in Cairns in 2011 and stated “For hinterland mining development, lack of road development and quick short linkage with the ports of Cairns and Mourilyan for both output and input is a development constraint. The Kuranda Range Road needs to be taken to a level where it can safely take B-Double size vehicles as soon as possible.” Cummings’ research has also demonstrated that heavy vehicle movements along the Kuranda Range have increased from 407 Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) volumes in 1999 up to 701 AADT’s in 2009. This statistic indicates that there is the demand to use the Kuranda Range as a major link to Cairns, now the challenge is to address the efficiency of the route. Previous plans for upgrading the Kuranda Range Road proved to be cost prohibitive, in part due to environmental considerations.

The regional Resources sector has concerns that any exporting of resources that could be done from Far North has little access to port Facilities. Consequently, bulk materials for export, e.g. mineral sands, Magnetite, ore concentrates, are transported to Brisbane by road first (e.g., Vital Metals-Tungsten, Magnetite - Ingham). Regionally, there is interest in a sea, road and rail hub at Mourilyan. However, if Innisfail becomes the transport hub for Far North Queensland then this will reduce the number of trucks to the Tablelands and increase freight costs up here and return.

In this Kuranda Range Road Upgrade argument - we propose the establishing a 'loop' whereby trucks that arrive into Cairns loaded, proceed to the Tablelands and return south via Mourilyan or Mt Garnet loaded with Tableland produce. Tablelands freight could be exported out of Mourilyan reducing time, food kilometres and carbon emissions.

There is also an urgent need to examine the B double routes throughout the region. As greater significance is placed on food miles and carbon emissions it is important to maximise B-Double transport as it is more efficient in time and cost and ultimately reduces the number of trucks on the roads. The increased cost of hitching and unhitching at Mareeba and Smithfield is prohibitive for most producers and transport companies. From the Mareeba District Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association point of view, *“improved infrastructure to move our product out of the area is a high priority and one of the problems we have with the Mareeba – Cairns connection. We are not able to move our product efficiently from Mareeba to Cairns and we are unable to receive vehicles from the Cairns area. It would be much more efficient if this was able to occur”*.

There is a need for maintenance and upgrade of state controlled and council roads. The lack of all-weather access into the region during the wet-season is cited as an impediment to economic development. For example, flood proofing the inland route via the Kennedy Highway and Greenvale to Charters Towers, the Kennedy Development Road at Nettle Creek Bridge at Innot Hot Springs. This is a very old, low lying, one lane timber structure that is a constant source of problems for the trucking industry during the wet season.



During peak times road trains and trucks travel this bridge approximately every 20 minutes and consequently it is part of a very busy road network and tourist route. This route is a vitally important alternative route when the Bruce Highway is cut by flooding during the wet season. In the 2011 wet season operators experienced months of delays and restrictions through a permit system which in turn impacted on local businesses waiting for delivery of food, freight, equipment and getting cattle to markets.

Possible Solutions

- Explore options for improving public transport to better connect Towns / communities to other towns and Cairns Airport.
- Upgrade Kuranda Range Road - road needs to be upgraded to ensure efficient movement of B- doubles, however does not need to be 4 lanes which increase the impacts on the environment. Three lane proposal for Kuranda Range Road. This would create a 'loop' for heavy transport vehicles unloading in Cairns, travel to Mareeba via the Kuranda Range to pick up produce and then head south to either Mourilyan or other southern markets via the Palmerston Highway. This loop would ultimately reduce time to move goods and thereby reduce the cost of transport.
- One solution as alternative to Kuranda range is another access to Cairns by revisiting the use of the Quaid Road (Wangetti to Lake Southedge). This would cut the travelling time to Port Douglas, Northern Beaches etc.
- Decoupling pad at Koah or near the top of the Kuranda Range Road.
- Extend access to the region by increasing the B double routes throughout the region. Maximise the usage of B Doubles to move produce and livestock throughout the region thereby reducing the number of trucks on the road and the associated carbon emissions, and reducing food miles through greater efficiency and timeliness of transport.
- All weather access to the region via an inland access route – Mt Garnet, Greenvale, Charters Towers.