

Bungled freight line 'staggering'

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THE suspension of work on a dedicated Sydney freight line was a bungle on the most important rail project in Australia, the federal Nationals leader, Warren Truss, said.

Mr Truss, the Opposition trade spokesman, said NSW ports are losing business to interstate rivals because freight cannot be moved through Sydney quickly enough, as trains are held up for hours on the outskirts of the city to wait for passenger trains.

The federally-funded Australian Rail Track Corporation said it is re-evaluating construction of the \$309 million Southern Sydney Freight Line after delays and costs increases.

Contractors have been told to stop earthworks and construction for at least five months while telephone, gas and electricity cabling is moved from the rail corridor and sections of the route are redesigned.

Mr Truss said it seemed "incredible" that bulldozers had been sent in before the cabling had been moved.

"It has been in the pipeline for at least a decade and the route has been settled for five years ... It is a bungle and an important bungle," said Mr Truss, a former transport minister.

Rod Sims, a former State Rail chairman and a transport deputy secretary for the Keating government, said the suspension of work on the freight line - due to open early next year but now delayed until 2011 - was "staggering".

"This reflects badly on everyone involved. This sort of thing shouldn't happen. You wouldn't want to see this pattern of behaviour repeated on other projects," said Mr Sims, a consultant with Port Jackson Partners.

An infrastructure report by Mr Sims for the Business Council of Australia has highlighted port bottlenecks and the inadequacy of the rail system to handle an anticipated 50 per cent increase in freight by 2020. The report last week called for an overhaul of planning on government infrastructure projects.

Mr Sims said yesterday the debacle highlighted the need for pre-feasibility studies in government projects to identify problems before money is allocated.

The Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, Anthony Albanese, sought yesterday to distance the federal government from the delay. "This is an important project and the Government is keen to see it delivered as soon as possible. The operational issues relating to its delivery are a matter more appropriately handled by the Australian Rail Track Corporation," he said.

A RailCorp spokesman said RailCorp had met all of its obligations in assisting ARTC manage the construction of the line.

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