



Political persuasion: Central Wheatbelt farmers John Goodier, Mark Hooper, Bob Goodier, Andrew Crook, Paul Madaffri, Greg Richards, Richard Last, Ken Hooper, Lindsay Tuckwell, Craig Last, Bryce Hayes-Thompson, Cam Gethin, Josh Fuchsichler and Aaron Purssell, and their trucks, on the strip of asphalt beside the Korbekka bin. They claim the bin can only be emptied by Tier 3 rail. Attempts to empty it by truck this year had to be halted when gravel roads at either end of the asphalt failed causing significant damage to the road surface.

By MAL GILL

THE state government must be part of a “common sense” solution that sees Tier 3 grain lines reopened quickly according to Central Wheatbelt farmers.

The farmers claim the government, and a lack of transparency in its 49-year lease of the freight rail system to Brookfield Rail, is at the “core of the problem” and must be part of the solution.

They want the government to step in and reopen the lines until a permanent solution can be worked out.

Failure to resolve a dispute between Brookfield and CBH saw 509 kilometres of grain lines, including the Merredin-Narembeen and Merredin-Bruce Rock lines which comprise about half the length of the last operational Tier 3 rail lines, shut down and put into “care and maintenance” by Brookfield on Monday.

“Step in and reopen the lines” is a message the farmers intend impressing on Central

Wheatbelt MP Mia Davies and Transport and Finance Minister Dean Nalder when he visits the region later this month.

Mr Nalder is scheduled to meet with Bruce Rock and Quairading shire councils and members of the Wheatbelt Railway Retention Alliance (WRRRA).

About 18 Central Wheatbelt farmers attended a protest rally on Tuesday morning last week, parking their trucks along a strip of asphalt road past the Korbekka bin siding on the Bruce Rock line to highlight problems local councils will face in trying to maintain roads used by significantly increased grain truck traffic.

Merredin shire president and one of the farmers attending the rally, Ken Hooper, said attempts to empty the Korbekka bin by road this season had failed when the gravel connecting roads at either end of the asphalt strip – the southern road in Bruce Rock shire and the northern road in Merredin shire – quickly became cut up and needed resurfacing.

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“We (Merredin shire) have got two (grain bins) that should only be emptied by rail, Korbelka and Koonadgin,” Cr Hooper said.

He said the Koonadgin bin, on the Narembeen line, was serviced only by gravel roads which suffered from a moisture problem.

Neither bin was accounted for in the Strategic Grain Network Review, so no government funds were subsequently allocated to upgrade the local roads which service them, Cr Hooper said.

WRRRA representative, WA Farmers’ Federation Merredin zone co-ordinator and Bruce Rock farmer Jane Fuchsbichler said farmers were “the meat in the sandwich” of Tier 3 closures.

“It’s unreasonable to expect CBH, which is effectively us – the farmers, to be sorting it out with Brookfield.

“The government has to be part of the solution.

“We would like to see the government step in and reopen the Tier 3 lines immediately – it’s just common sense,” Mrs Fuchsbichler said.

She said the line closures and logistics of now clearing the volume of grain by road was “not just a farmers’ thing”, it is a “whole of the community thing”.

“There will be a significant increase of truck traffic on local roads as a result (of Tier 3 line closures) not just this year, but every year.

“The problems communities will have this year with the safety issues of more trucks on the roads, more trucks sharing roads with school buses, more trucks going past schools, the noise issues of more trucks going past hospitals and houses, they will be on-going, they will not go away unless the lines are reopened.”

Mrs Fuchsbichler said the “lack of transparency” with the lease of the freight rail network had frustrated farmers’ attempts to establish how the rail transport costs they paid could be broken down into track maintenance, fuel, wages and other cost components, and to establish the veracity of track condition reports.

“Brookfield is only answerable to a bunch of Canadian shareholders,” she said.

The Tier 3 grain lines closure could be “just the tip of the iceberg”, Mrs Fuchsbichler said.

In future, Tier 2 lines that did not achieve Brookfield revenue targets could also face closure, she warned.