

Waka Kotahi / NZTA

Subject: State Highway Safety Issue, Greymouth

Attn: To whom it may concern

08/12/2022

Dear NZTA,

I am writing to you with a safety concern that mainly affects cyclists travelling north of Greymouth.

The area of concern is a stretch of approximately 1km immediately NE of the Cobden Bridge, indicated below:



I am writing in two capacities, both personal and professional.

On a personal level, I am a resident of Runanga, a township 7km north of this location. I've lived in Runanga and worked in Greymouth for 2 years now and drive through this stretch most days. I am also a cyclist, having bicycle toured extensively across Europe (14 countries over 8 months) and previously commuting by bicycle in Auckland on a variety of routes. I own both a commuting/touring bicycle and an e-bike.

In a professional capacity, I am a member of the Police, currently a Detective but with 12 years' experience covering a variety of duties including road policing, vehicle collision investigations and leading a Police e-bike trial in Auckland CBD where I worked with Zane Bray, the Auckland Transport Walking and Cycling Co-ordinator.

In moving to Greymouth, I had hoped to cycle to work, for all the usual good reasons. The distance is less than 8km, however despite trialling the route I have chosen to drive because it is simply too dangerous to 'run the gauntlet' and try and make it through this stretch of road. I have cycled the route but feel if I did it on a regular basis, it would only be a matter of time until I was struck by a passing vehicle.

HAZARDS

Without wishing to exaggerate, it's built as if it's a death trap designed to ensnare cyclists and funnel them into vehicles. Some key hazards include:

- There are several blind corners, limiting visibility.
- There are several crests and dips, further limiting visibility.
- There is no shoulder for the majority of this stretch of road.
- There are physical barriers built along the south side and a cliff wall on the north side, leaving cyclists no choice but to ride within the vehicle lane and no escape from danger.
- The narrow space outside of the vehicle lane, where some exists, is filled with rough debris, which cyclists tend to try and ride in to escape vehicle traffic but increases the chance of falling or having to make a sudden turn back into the vehicle lane.
- The stretches being very long with no shoulder and limited visibility removes the option for cyclists of pausing and waiting for a gap to appear in traffic.
- The area has a posted 'Open Road' speed limit immediately east of the Cobden Bridge, so traffic travelling north-bound tends to eagerly accelerate. Traffic travelling south-bound comes in at high speed from a prior long stretch that runs fairly straight with good visibility.
- There are double yellow lines for most of the stretch, due to the blind corners, but there isn't enough physical space for vehicles to safely pass bicycles in this stretch without crossing the double yellow centreline. Cyclists are then either passed with a hair's breadth of space or vehicles cross the double yellow centreline to avoid them. Vehicles doing this risk having to dark back if vehicles approach around the blind corner and I see this often.
- High speed vehicles and slow speed cyclists are effectively forced to funnel together in a matter that is incompatible, but with nowhere else for the cyclists to go.
- It's such a long stretch, with climbing involved, that even on a powerful e-bike such as mine it takes 1.5 minutes to get through. I see regular cyclists taking much longer and vehicles simply won't travel slowly behind them and queue up. They just pass dangerously.
- The high trees and cliffs on the north side cast shadows over the stretch that under sunny conditions creates a strobe-light effect for drivers as they pass intermittently from sun to shadow, further limiting visibility and making it easy to miss seeing cyclists as they travel around the blind corners. I am a vigilant driver, as most cyclists are, but have had some very close calls with 'surprise cyclists' due to this strobe-light and blind corner combination.
- As this is the main West Coast route, it is frequented by campervans. Most of these are wider than standard vehicles and the drivers, often tourists, are frequently uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the extra width and sometimes not used to driving on the left.
- The physical barrier on one side and cliff on the other has a tendency to cause many campervans to veer over the double yellow centreline. This happens on blind corners where vehicles travelling the other way may be doing the same. I see this often, with regular vehicles swerving back away from each other. You then add a cyclist to that narrow space and it's just a recipe for disaster.
- I've seen many close calls and watched vehicles choose to swerve back towards the cyclist they were passing rather than risking clipping the corner of a vehicle that suddenly appears coming the other way. Cyclists will always lose in this situation.
- There is one sign as you approach this section from the north side advising to share the road with cyclists, but it's a bit of a joke leading into such a drawn out and dangerous section of road. One warning sign cannot make up for such inherently dangerous infrastructure.

WHY PEOPLE CYCLE THIS ROUTE

Obviously, I have made the choice not to cycle this route. I am able to drive to work and find other ways to exercise, save money and save the planet. But others are not so fortunate or are directed towards this route unawares.

The only alternative route north is to detour along SH7 to Stillwater, cross the bridge and come back through Taylorville. An additional 23km. This involves other safety risks travelling along SH7 and is simply too far of a detour for any regular commuter to consider.

From a commuting perspective, it's only 7-10km to travel from the Cobden Bridge to the neighbouring townships of Runanga, Dunollie and Rapahoe, with a combined population of approximately 2,000 people. The vast majority of the working population are employed south of Cobden Bridge. All access to supermarkets, general shops, medical facilities, etc. is south of the Cobden Bridge. There is almost nothing to the north until Westport, nearly 100km away.

The population is typically older, with several people I know of unable to drive due to medical reasons. One man cycles the route most days wearing a motorcycle helmet because he has epilepsy. He brings back bags of groceries. There are no busses. Taxis are expensive and seldom available. As a result, people commonly cycle this route. I drove through around midday yesterday and passed 5 cyclists, with the clothing clearing indicating 4 were locals commuting and only one a bicycle tourist.

Bicycle tourists are also very common, a daily occurrence outside of winter. This stretch is part of the Tour De Aotearoa route, guiding adventurous cyclists from Cape Reinga to Bluff. People come from all around the world to do this and it's on the bucket list for many Kiwis. The route guides you along the north side of the Grey River from Ikamatua, through Taylorville then onto SH6 through this section to reach Greymouth.

I frequently see bicycle tourists, evident by their gear, pausing at the base of the hill, staring at the dangerous bottleneck ahead of them and nervously checking for traffic approaching from behind. You can read the concerns on their faces, thinking, "This can't be right. Have I missed a turn or alternative path somewhere?"

Bicycle tourism has further been increased due to the establishment of the Paparoa Great Walk, which is built for hiking or mountain biking and runs from Blackball to Punakaiki. The Punakaiki area has recently had extensive walking/cycling paths built along the highway so that cyclists finishing the journey there have safe passage between accommodation, food and attractions, such as the Pancake Rocks. For the calibre of cyclist this route attracts, it is a logical and enticing option to spend the night in Punakaiki then enjoy cycling the scenic coast road 45km back to Greymouth the next day, rather than paying to be collected via a shuttle.

It's similarly attractive to cycle the 25km from Greymouth to Blackball and spend the night before starting the journey. Bicycles are available to be rented from Greymouth and many arrive in Greymouth via the TranzAlpine train, taking their bicycles with them from Christchurch.

As you can see, the safety issues I have highlighted impact not only upon a small population of locals who travel this route by necessity, but also upon a large population of tourists who are pushed towards this vital bottleneck on a daily basis.

I am a very confident cyclist, but also cautious. I have deemed this route too dangerous to consider riding on a regular basis, despite my inclinations. And yet I see it is being ridden by many others on a daily basis and for the reasons I have outline above, I know these numbers will only increase.

RESPONSIBILITY

I appreciate that responsibility for this stretch of the road may be in a gray area of overlap.

- As a State Highway, ultimate responsibility belongs with the NZTA.
- It sits within the Grey District and affects residents in their Northern Ward.
- It forms tourism infrastructure that affects both local tourism and is part of a national route.
- Kiwirail maintains a rail corridor that hugs the south side of this stretch of road, with a dedicated rail bridge to the east of the Cobden vehicle bridge and the rail crossing underneath SH6 within this stretch.

I am sending this to all of the above and would encourage those government agencies this affects to see this overlap not as a barrier to being able implement better infrastructure but rather as an opportunity to collaborate and draw from wider, shared budgets, to achieve a good outcome.

SUGGESTIONS

SH6 has been cut into an already steep cliff, which makes this an inherently difficult and likely expensive space within which to add further shoulder or a cycling/walking path. There is the potential to run a path further down the hill, but it would have to work around the existing rail corridor. The path cannot be too close to the river as it is prone to flooding. The path to cross Cobden Bridge is already well adequate and it would make sense to make the most of this, however if the rail bridge could be crossed it would bypass half of the most dangerous section.

With all this in mind, these are some suggestions I would ask you to consider:

- Build a pathway from the car park for the Cobden Cave that runs adjacent to SH6 but further down the bank, crossing and hugging the rail corridor then joining back up with SH6 where the track passes underneath. This is probably the cheapest option and could be completed with minimal disruption to the traffic flow on SH6.
- Widen SH6 to allow for a shoulder/bicycle lane. This would be costly in digging out rock on the north side and/or building cantilevered pathway on the south side and would disrupt traffic flow during construction.
- Attach an alternative cycling/walking path to the existing rail bridge to bypass half of the dangerous section and hug the track until it crosses under SH6. A disadvantage to this is people unfamiliar with the area may not realise it's there and gravitate towards the Cobden vehicle bridge, thus ending up still in the danger zone.

I am extremely concerned that one day soon I will be called to investigate a fatal accident where a cyclist will have been struck by a vehicle and killed in one of the many pinch points along this stretch of road. It would forever rest on my conscience if I did not take the time to bring my concerns to you formally, now, in the manner that I have.

I implore you to take a prevention mindset towards the issues I have raised and not wait until such a fatal accident occurs before this route sees the development it desperately needs.

Yours Sincerely,



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Greymouth Police

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