

Surveying in the Desert: Sealing the Silver City and Cobb Highways in Far Western NSW

Thomas Casey

Casey Surveying and Design

Thomas@csad.com.au

ABSTRACT

The Cobb and Silver City highways provide a north-south connection between north-western Victoria and north-western NSW. They are the only roads in the NSW state highway network that are not entirely sealed and can easily flood and remain closed for weeks after periods of rain. Highway closures regularly impact the roads, directly affecting local residents and businesses, essential services and interstate road users. Both highways had been progressively sealed as funding became available, although this was sporadic to say the least. In 2018, the NSW Government announced increased and accelerated funding to upgrade their alignment, pavement and drainage and to place an initial seal on the 209 km remaining unsealed on these outback state highways. Since January 2018, Casey Surveying and Design has been engaged by Transport for NSW (TfNSW) on multiple occasions to provide both surveying and design services. We have provided equipment, human resources and experience over that time to deliver TfNSW over 150 km of detail and control surveys, 30 km of road design, road acquisition surveys, a 55 km identification survey, multiple Protection of Survey Infrastructure (POSI) investigations and a dozen machine control installations to keep the initial sealing project on track to achieve the targeted completion of mid-2022. This presentation outlines this unique project, which recently received the 2021 EISSI Award for Infrastructure & Construction. The sheer remoteness of the project sites was a major challenge in every instance, particularly the travel times involved, and Casey Surveying worked collaboratively with TfNSW to remain in touch with Broken Hill and Parkes based survey, design and engineering project teams, and with the multiple TfNSW and council road construction crews to complete works on multiple sites on most occasions when a visit to the area was conducted. The desert threw everything from drought, 51°C heat, rain storms (which saw the crew becalmed for days) and dust storms to snakes, hordes of emus and even wild camels at the field crews. An enormous amount of boot leather was used, with blood, sweat and (yes, at times) tears shed, and our approach might not be considered the most high-tech in the current era of data collection, but it was appropriate, timely and accurate. The consistent provision of surveying and spatial information to the project teams in multiple offices and multiple crews on-site has been central to the success and smooth running of the entire initial sealing project, leading to a greatly increased local awareness and appreciation of the specialised services and input the surveying profession provides in the project development and implementation of road infrastructure projects. The author has been working on the Silver City Highway his entire 27-year career and says that “finally sealing the highway to Tibooburra, providing an all-weather road to the local families and businesses, is quite simply the project with the greatest community benefit I will ever be involved in”. Today, less than 60 km of highway remain to be sealed.

KEYWORDS: Silver City Highway, Cobb Highway, Tibooburra, Wilcannia, Ivanhoe.