RAIL SAFETY — LIGHTING

Grievance

MS M. BEARD (North West Central) [9.29 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Transport. I thank the minister for taking my grievance, which is about the relentless battle undertaken by 12 families of road crash victims across Australia. It is led by dedicated constituents Lara Jensen and Merrilea Broad, who continue to fight to have Western Australian rail operators adequately illuminate trains to prevent further fatalities. Both Lara and Merrilea lost family members in a tragic triple fatality at the unlit Yarramony level crossing near Jennacubbine in WA on 8 July 2000. Merrilea lost her daughter, Jess, and Lara lost her brother, Christian, along with their friend Hilary Smith, when they were struck and killed by a grain train loaded with 28 wagons of wheat.

This year marks 23 years since the deaths of those three beautiful young country people in what was one of the worst rail crashes in WA history, and 22 years since the release of recommendations by WA State Coroner Alastair Hope in 2001 for all locomotives to be fitted with external lighting in addition to ditch lighting to warn motorists of their approach. As a witness before the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services in Canberra just three years after the death of her Jess, Merrilea bravely raised, in particular, train conspicuity.

A year on, a report recommended that all locomotives be fitted with rotating beacon lights to help make them more visible and reduce level crossing accidents. The rail industry and the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator, since its formation in 2013, have seemingly chosen not to heed these safety recommendations, despite train lighting and passive level crossing safety recommendations also being made by two other State Coroners in NSW and Victoria and findings from numerous committees after several high-profile rail crashes spanning decades. State and federal governments have also seemingly done little to pressure rail operators to improve train illumination standards through legislation—something that is surely in need of consideration and a bipartisan and commonsense approach—to save lives.

The concerted lobbying efforts in the past three years by the families of rail crash victims has culminated in two national train lighting reports, both clearly stating how train lighting can be improved. These reports—the *Freight train visibility report* and the Monash Institute of Railway Technology report—are the rail industry's own research, but it seems that rail operators can still choose to ignore the recommendations. The overarching finding of the Monash Institute of Railway Technology report into train lighting, released in March 2022, was that additional lighting on trains, specifically additional beacon lighting, improves their visibility, and that a beacon light's effect is significant when the level crossing is obtuse and when the road user is in close range to the level crossing, again reinforcing the importance of auxiliary lighting on locomotives for improved visibility in line with coronial recommendations made by WA State Coroner Alastair Hope back in 2001.

Just last month, the national standards development organisation Rail Industry Safety and Standards Board indicated a reluctance to support flashing beacon lights—the accepted indicator of a hazard on our roads—or side lighting on trains in the redrafted industry safety standard *AS 7531: Lighting and visibility*, despite numerous coroners and multiple trials indicating that these lights can prevent crashes and save lives. In doing so, they have seemingly ignored the findings of both the *Freight train visibility report* and the Monash Institute of Railway Technology. It seems to be an oversight that no road safety or road user organisation was included on the development group tasked with redrafting train illumination standard AS 7531, which is supposed to govern the standards of the heaviest, most dangerous vehicles on land, with the final outcome of the redraft and any new inclusions in the standard not due to be publicly released until January 2024. Presumably, this redrafted AS 7531 standard is designed to protect the safety of road users, train drivers and track workers; as such, a reasonable assumption should be that rail companies should be investing to improve train and rolling stock visibility. I travel thousands of kilometres on our roads, and the illumination of trucks and road trains is a given and is very evident. I personally fail to see why trains should be any different and should not be well lit.

With around 491 passive level crossings in WA still controlled only by stop and give-way signs where trains intersect with motorists, surely it is time for it to be non-negotiable for the rail industry to adequately illuminate its trains commensurate with the serious hazard they represent in line with all other high-risk industries including road transport, mining and construction.

Lara, Merrilea, and independent road and rail researcher Dr Brett Hughes, who has been publicly supporting and assisting the families with the campaign to improve train illumination and safety measures at unlit crossings, are fully committed to continuing the fight for train lighting so another family is not faced with this preventable legacy. More than 20 organisations nationally, including peak farming and road transport bodies, the RAC and Country Women's Association in Western Australia, are also supporting these families and their push for better lighting on trains and safer roads.

Following the minister's meeting with Lara, Merrilea and Dr Hughes in June this year and the understanding and commitment that I know she has to take up the issue of inadequate train illumination with WA rail operators, I ask the minister to provide an update and outline the progress made to improve regional rail crossing safety by requiring and ensuring that train operators install flashing beacon lights and side lighting to locomotives to improve the visibility for railway wagons.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [9.35 am]: I thank the member for the grievance, and I again acknowledge the tragic circumstances in which young Australians have died in incidents relating to level crossings in the regions.

As the member rightly pointed out, a lot of work has been done nationally on rail safety. The requirement of particular standards is a national responsibility. Recently, significant progress has been made on research into train conspicuousness approaching level crossings, with the Australian Centre for Rail Innovation report in 2022, the Monash trials and the March 2023 report. The Rail Industry Safety and Standards Board is currently reviewing the existing standard governing train lighting and visibility, and that is expected to be published in the first half of 2024.

I have taken this issue very seriously since it was raised both in this place and with me directly by the families, and we are working with industry to improve rail safety. Next week, I will be holding a discussion with the rail industry to discuss rail safety, including train lighting and visibility, and how we can all contribute to improve safety at level crossings.

Western Australia has been at the forefront of the trials. Aurizon has applied strips of photoluminescent glow-in-the-dark paint to 10 grain wagons owned by Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd to examine their effectiveness compared with the reflectorised strips already in place on every locomotive and wagon across Australia. CBH will make a final decision on the effectiveness of these strips towards the end of the year. Aurizon has also fitted flashing beacon lights along both sides of a CBH class locomotive. CBH confirmed in August that following these trials on locomotive lighting, it will now install LED beacon lights on all its current and future locomotives as part of its safety commitment to enhance train visibility in regional Western Australia. Aurizon, together with other industry operators, has been working with the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator to cooperatively conduct lighting trials to improve the visibility of trains.

There are two parts to improving safety at level crossings. The first is, of course, lighting the trains to make them more visible, and the second is making sure that people are aware of the level crossings as they approach them. At the Infrastructure and Transport Ministers' Meetings, rail crossing safety has been a regular agenda item. The National Level Crossing Safety Committee has finalised consultation on a strategy for 2024–33 and a work plan has been published.

Funding has been provided by the commonwealth government through the Regional Australia Level Crossing Safety Program. The existing $20 million in investment will be used to fund the renewal of existing active level crossing controls and for further research. Funding from the commonwealth government has been made available by two separate forms of grants—a level crossing safety research and innovation grant and a grant from the regional level crossing upgrade fund. We have made a submission for a research and innovation grant to trial a new form of active level crossing control that relies on radiocommunication between the crossing controls and the in-track detection. Main Roads has recently advised that its application was successful and is currently working with the commonwealth to finalise the grant details. Main Roads has also made a round 1 application for funding via the upgrade fund to upgrade 14 passively controlled level crossings to be actively controlled. It is yet to be advised of the outcome of this application. It is also preparing a submission for a round 2 application.

As a result of all the work done by the families, we also completed a review of all passively controlled public road level crossings earlier this year. The review undertook detailed site assessments at each crossing and came up with a series of recommendations. In May this year, I announced that of the 491 passively controlled level crossings, 87 are to have upgrades to their regulatory control. Thirteen passively controlled crossings are to be upgraded to active controls. Those 13 sites are included in the regional level crossing upgrade fund. Seven give-way control crossings will be upgraded to active flashing light controls and six Doppler sign controlled crossings will be upgraded to active flashing lights. Seventy-four give-way control crossings are to be upgraded to stop sign controls. Of the 87 level crossing upgrades, 81 are in the wheatbelt, two are in the goldfields and Esperance, two are in the great southern, one is in the midwest and one is in the metro area. Once completed—this is very important—no give-way controlled level crossing will remain on a main rail line in Western Australia. Additionally, 50 per cent of public road level crossings will be controlled by flashing lights or boom gates. That will be one of the highest ratios of active to passive controlled crossings in the nation. It is expected that the upgrades will result in a 33 per cent reduction in the cumulative Australian Level Crossing Assessment Model risk score across the 87 locations.

As I said, Main Roads is in the process of finalising the full scope of works on the delivery of upgrading the Give Way signs to Stop signs. All materials have been ordered and work will be underway very soon. Main Roads has

gradually rolled out the back-to-back installation of the railway crossing signage at WA's 469 actively controlled level crossings. Again, this has resulted in an increase on how conspicuous the crossing controls are.

Another key point is that the signage along the tier 3 rail lines, which were basically shut down over time, will have their existing Stop or Give Way sign removed and replaced with a railway crossing with new signage. That will make it very clear which rail lines have active role and which no longer have an active rail. Again, that is being done to improve safety across the board. I thank the member for the grievance. It is an issue we are working on very hard and diligently. There is more to do, but I am very proud of the progress so far.