



AUSTRALIAN FLEXIBLE PAVEMENT ASSOCIATION
Employment White Paper

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About Us

The Australian Flexible Pavement Association (AfPA) is the peak industry body that represent the flexible pavements industry, delivering safe and sustainable outcomes to benefit communities across Australia.

For over 50 years, AfPA has brought together our dynamic and multifaceted multibillion dollar industry that is responsible for the design, specification, manufacture, construction, and maintenance of all forms of bituminous flexible pavements.

AfPA's members constitute a diverse array of professional organisations who support the industry and are passionate and committed to the advancement flexible pavement technology for the benefit of the road user and broader community.

AfPA members include bitumen suppliers, asphalt producers, sprayed surface operators, major consultancies, suppliers (such as equipment providers, line markers and profiler contractors) and all State Government Road Authorities, and many Local Governments from across Australia.

AfPA's Vision embodies three key objectives:

- to support industry be healthy, safe, innovative, and adaptive to change acting as a platform for industry sustainability,
- to support the national harmonisation of best industry practice, promoting the benefits of the flexible pavements industry,
- to drive a national culture of continuous improvement.

AfPA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission for consideration of the Federal Government's Employment White Paper.

We trust that this submission will provide insights into the critical importance of our industry in road infrastructure construction and maintenance, as Government's most valuable asset in the safety and connectivity of our communities, economic competitiveness and circular economy practices and contributions.

We are firmly committed to working with all levels of Government towards building a skilled, productive and diverse workforce to support the current and future needs of our nation.

AfPA's Strategic Priorities

Our submission provides a snapshot of our industry before moving on to assess key challenges and making recommendations on how the flexible pavement industry will contribute to the Federal Governments roadmap for Australia to build a bigger, better-trained and more productive workforce – to boost incomes and living standards and create more opportunities for more Australians.

Our strategic priorities aligning to the White Paper are as outlined below:

Health and Safety

AfPA is firmly committed to promote a continuous improvement health and safety culture across our industry. It is recognised that one of the highest risks for our industry is frontline workers exposed to traffic.

Road workers put themselves at risk to deliver the infrastructure Australian drivers are demanding. Unfortunately, it is some of these same drivers who are putting these workers at risk. It is paramount to AfPA and our members to enable and support industry to continuously improve the health and safety of our people and communities we serve.

Sustainability

AfPA promotes sustainability on three fronts, our people, the environment and economic:

- AfPA leads the knowledge requirements for our industry in developing skills that underpin the new jobs being created to support Australia's economic recovery and supports the inclusion and growth of diversity.
- AfPA advocates for the continual improvement in environmental sustainability that works towards circular economy practices. This includes our industry doing its part in addressing the use of renewable materials to control waste.
- AfPA advocates for sustainable funding of Australia's most valuable asset – our roads. In particular the preservation and protection of the major investment that has been made in this asset which connects communities and contributes to Australia's economic competitiveness.

Collaboration and Partnership

AfPA drives a partnership culture with all its stakeholders to promote the delivery of outcomes that benefits members and Australia.

Knowledge and Innovation

AfPA works to promote a continuous improvement culture that demonstrates to members a commitment to best engineering practice and promotes the removal of barriers to innovation. We strive to enhance opportunities for members to implement innovative products and processes in flexible pavement engineering applications.

AfPA share national and deliver international knowledge to Australia relating to best:

- health and safety
- circular economy practice / sustainability
- best construction and manufacturing practice
- contractual practices
- engineering; and
- use of digital technology.

Flexible pavement industry snapshot

Australia's roads are the critical infrastructure that logistically connects us as a society.

Across all aspects of our day-to-day lives, roads bring us together, facilitating all functions of our social fabric and economic activities. The ongoing viability, level of service and safety is entirely dependent on the significant contributions of all levels of Government to new projects and maintenance of the existing network, and equally a skilled competent workforce to deliver on these commitments.

Alike several essential services industries, ours is facing a skills shortage that has come about from an aging population and challenges to attract and retain new entrants.

Infrastructure Australia's Market Capacity Report 2022 indicates that annual spending is set to reach \$52 billion by 2023, an unprecedented level of investment in Australia, creating thousands of jobs and supporting the country's economic recovery. The Capacity Report finds that 80% of the infrastructure financing will be committed to the transport sector, including road and rail work, representing approximately 4 of every 5 dollars of investment.

AfPA firmly commends the Federal Government on the ambitious and ongoing infrastructure investment, which has served to connect communities, support jobs and helped push the industry's performance to record levels, the road and bridge construction industry heavily depends on ongoing public funding and urgently requires a commitment to existing infrastructure maintenance and renewal.

Underpinning the delivery and maintenance of our road infrastructure is the urgent need to attract and retain a skilled, competent and diverse workforce.

Current key challenges to the flexible pavement industry

The injection of public funding for shovel-ready road projects to stimulate economic activity to counter the recession and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, recent and ongoing natural disaster events and address the declining condition and backlog of road assets is equally dependent on the strategic and investment to attract and retain a skilled, competent and diverse workforce.

Industry seeks to work closely with all levels of Government to issues must be led by industry, working within their local areas to rebuild and restore their local economies in light of the recent biosecurity and weather events. This will foster long-term resilience, productivity and competitiveness. In order to do this, we urgently seek to attract new entrants to our industry and ensure that they are suitably skilled to deliver on this critical infrastructure.

Climate Change and Weather Instability

2022 has been a year of unprecedented weather instability. Across Australia we have seen extreme weather events, including major flooding, which have proven to significantly deteriorate Australia's roads. These weather events have exposed major deficiencies in Australia's infrastructure workforce, particularly a major shortage of skilled road workers and insufficient maintenance pipelines and budget for repairs.

With climatic extremes expected to be continuing across the eastern seaboard, it is critical that the Government immediately respond, with a combination of:

- response and recovery approach that addresses the existing damage sustained to our road network, and where possible extending the lifespan of the existing network, and
- embedding a heightened level of resilience in the longer term planning and maintenance strategies to our existing road network, that factors in best practice and emerging innovation and products that will ensure our road infrastructure is prepared to respond to these increasingly frequent extreme weather events.

Worker Shortages and Immigration

Recent events, including ongoing weather instability and the COVID-19 Pandemic, have exposed major shortfalls within our industry – specifically the availability of trained and skilled workers. This shortage is inhibiting the ability to sustain our key infrastructure, our roads.

The challenge for our industry, however, is that the work we are completing is not just new projects but often urgent repairs on damaged roads which save lives. The inability for skilled labour to be brought to Australia from overseas has exacerbated this issue even further, resulting in delayed work and critical repairs unfulfilled.

Australia must take the opportunity to invest in a more skilled workforce, one which is capable of applying ‘band-aid’ fixes to urgent road issues as well as longer-term pipelines of maintenance funding. Both streams will require skilled workers who are both ready to respond nimbly to road damage and capable of thinking innovatively and sustainably for longer-term road benefits.

AfPA also calls for federal funding to address the national road maintenance backlog and create stability in the pipeline of maintenance funding to allow businesses to feel confident employing skilled workers stably.

Supporting a healthy pipeline of skilled road surfacing workers, who are fully accredited and upskilled, will not only lead to a more innovative and responsive industry but will also lead to better-connected, better functioning economy and society. In this regard, AfPA recommends the Federal Government reform pathways via Immigration Laws to access lower skilled visa entry for labourers interested in working in Australia.

To address these issues, AfPA recommends:

- the establishment of better pathways via Immigration Laws to access lower skilled visa entry for labourers interested in working in Australia,
- developing a skilled workforce at home is providing access to secondary and tertiary funded (or other) programs to incite interest in roads construction at the grassroots level.
- assist AfPA and the broader industry with building recognised training programs for school leavers or young job seekers, and
- maintaining current enterprise agreement schemes negotiated with partner sector unions to reduce further inflationary pressures and support the efficient delivery of Australia’s roads.

AfPA Industry Skills Card – We are doing our bit to train the next generation of Australian road builders.

A key initiative to both attract new entrants to the flexible pavement industry, support the reputation and recognise the work of our workforce, AfPA in collaboration with industry and supported by State Government has developed the Australian Flexible Pavement Industry Skills Card (Skills Card).

Bituminous surfacing industry is a specialist trades skill set that ensures the safety of the travelling public and protects government most asset – its roads. On this basis, those who deliver the nation's highest order roads, should possess qualifications specific to this industry to ensure quality, safety, long term durability, performance, and workforce sustainability, identifying career pathways through industry.

These skillsets have been designed to be transferable between employers and State boundaries and recognised nationally. The qualification needs to be recognised as a trade equivalent that provides confidence to procurers and promotes attraction and retention of talent to the industry. This can only happen if authorities implement the skills card into the procurement process.

As the nation's leading industry association for bituminous surfacing, AfPA has been compiling a significant library of industry specific resources that create a VET unit of competency, to be utilised by affiliated RTO's. These resources will be retained and shared through the association to ensure the latest practical knowledge training is provided to the Flexible Pavements Industry.

The Skills Card which is transferrable, recognises prior experience and the academics of each organisation. In partnership with State Road Authorities, this scheme will identify, train, and provide each worker a qualification on a skill set basis. The following skills sets within the industry card have been developed to date:

- Safely handle bituminous materials
- Asphalt Surfacing
- Spray Sealing
- Profile planer Operations
- Insitu Stabilisation Operations

Last month, the skills of Australian roadworkers were formally recognised thanks to a new qualification developed by AfPA and approved by the National Skills Commission. We recommend that this skills card be adopted and applied on a national scale.

The new 11-part qualification industry skills card will support better career development for workers and attract more people into a sector that is facing a skills shortage at a time of unprecedented demand from infrastructure projects and repairs to roads damaged by recent weather events.

Under the new Skills Card, Australia's roads are set to become safer and more skilfully built than ever through a set of specially designed part qualifications introduced under the national qualification RII30920 Certificate III in Civil Construction – Bituminous Surfacing, designed to improve the nation's workforce and road building skills.

Recommendations

AfPA's recommendations to the Federal Government:

- Increase Federal Government maintenance spend on the Australian road network, with greater visibility to the pipeline of work over multiple years to support a sustainable workforce, resilience, safety and reliability.
- For a strategic alliance between all levels of Government and key industry associations around network spending and a planned approach to addressing the declining condition of Australia's roads – the government's largest and most valuable asset.
- Reform pathways via Immigration Laws to access lower skilled visa entry for labourers interested in working in Australia.
- Access to secondary and tertiary funded (or other) programs to insight interest in roads construction at the grassroots level.
- Assist AfPA and the broader industry with building recognised training programs for school leavers or young job seekers.
- Support existing enterprise agreement schemes negotiated with partner sector unions to reduce further inflationary pressures. .
- Support training and development opportunities to foster a diverse workforce within the flexible pavement industry.
- Address the \$13.6 billion worth of roads in poor to very poor conditions with a sustainable, consistent, and achievable pipeline of maintenance work. This is aligned with Infrastructure Australia's recommendations to urgently reverse the tide in the growing national backlog of underfunded maintenance on our nation's roads.
- Implement more, or extend and expand, initiatives whilst working to address dangerous, poorly maintained roads that disproportionately affect rural communities.

Once again, AfPA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission for consideration in the formulation of the White Paper and invites any queries or questions.