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**Grain Drain: The Impacts of Changing
Infrastructure and Marketing on the Wheat
Landscape of Northern New South Wales.**

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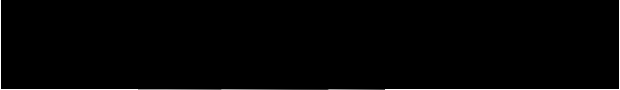
This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the award of the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England.

January, 2009

Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Darrell G. Fisher
January, 2009

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Abstract

Market accessibility has always been a driving force in the development of the wheat landscape in northern NSW. As the wheat frontier moved north and west from the coast through the tablelands to establish on the western slopes and plains, it was the accompanying changes in transport and storage infrastructure that played a major role in this development.

In the early years of poorly developed transport routes, local markets flourished and flour mills mushroomed. With the improvements in transport infrastructure, however, a local monopoly situation gave way to competition from elsewhere and the local wheat landscape faded away in favour of other activities which had a local comparative advantage. This is the story of the Northern Tablelands, where improved rail access and its extension to the north-west, led to the local demise of the wheat and flour industry and its growth in the north-west.

Globalisation, coupled with the deregulation of the State owned rail network and wheat marketing arrangements in recent years has led to dramatic ramifications for the wheat landscape in northern NSW. The problems faced by Australian Wheat Board (AWB) single desk export marketing following the Iraq scandal and the deregulation of domestic wheat marketing arrangements has led to changes in the grain supply chain. With the growth of feedlots and the potential growth in the biofuel industry, there has been a decline in the use of rail and its associated line-side silos in favour of on-farm storage and road transport.

These changes have had flow-on effects for the local communities established as centres servicing the surrounding district and forming an integral part of the wheat landscape. The growth in on-farm storage and increasing use of road transport has seen the demise of both the railnet serving the communities and the line-side silos that have served as icons of the wheat landscape. The impacts of the closure of the grain line and silo infrastructure on these service communities have been enormous while the impacts on the farming enterprises have resulted in adaptation to these altered conditions and to sweeping changes to the rural landscape.

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PREFACE

Rural Australia is currently in the throes of dramatic change
(Epps and Sorensen 1993a:1)

It can be argued that rural areas have always been in a state of change but in recent years the evolutionary process appears to have accelerated. This is clearly evident in the broadacre wheat farming landscape of northern NSW.

In recent years broadacre farming areas in rural Australia have been subjected to immense stress brought about by both natural causes, such as drought, and macro level public policy decisions. These changes have often resulted in the withdrawal of public sector essential services, such as the closing of schools, with flow-on effects to the private sector business, including financial institutions (Smailes 1997; Argent & Rolley 2000).

Indeed, the catalyst for this research project arose from changes in the wheat growing areas of northern NSW. For this thesis the area encompasses fifteen agronomy districts defined by the Department of Primary Industry (DPI) north of Latitude 31S stretching from Kempsey to Coonabarabran. On the 29th October, 2005 the grain line linking Binnaway through Coonabarabran and Baradine to Gwabegar was 'suspended from operations' (*Railway News* 2006c:33). Effectively, this means 'closed'. This alteration to the grain supply chain would clearly have repercussions for the bulk marketing of export grain with possible negative flow-on effects to the local service communities in the area.

Changes in infrastructure through time have been a major influence on the general evolution of the wheat farming landscape in NSW from its embryonic stage in the early days of the first European settlement at Farm Cove. In this regard we should be cognisant of the words of Winston Churchill:

Those who seek to plan the future should not forget the inheritance they received from the past, for it is only by studying the past as well as drawing for the future that the story of man's[sic] struggle can be understood (quoted in Humes 1994:44).

The basic aim of this study is to investigate the impact of changes that are occurring in the transport and related storage infrastructure in the wheat growing areas of northern

NSW on the human landscape of that area. Infrastructure change in the past had an enormous influence on the expansion of wheat growing areas and in the development of associated urban service centres. In order to understand the present, then, the impact of change through time is necessary. It can be argued that space can only be understood by reference to the objects and processes that constitute it (Sayer 1985:51). Indeed, the tall, concrete, cylindrical silos that are found throughout the wheat growing areas are an icon, a landscape structure epitomising the historical evolution of this broadacre industry (see Plate 1).

Recent changes in the grain supply chain, in the form of the closure of grain lines in the north of the State, form a part of this continuing evolutionary development and it is the impacts of this recent closure decision on the farming landscape, including the communities involved, that are the particular focus of this investigation. That is, the effects of these changes on the social and economic landscape need to be examined. To date, such an impact assessment has been a neglected area of research (Buttel *et al.* 1990:154).

The importance of infrastructure, in its broadest sense, is now on the agenda of policy makers in Australia, with the newly elected Federal Labor Government introducing the *Infrastructure Australia Bill* to Parliament on 21 February, 2008. A priority list of infrastructure projects should be available in 2009 with the basic aim being to enhance regional economic development. Hopefully, the findings of this thesis will contribute in at least some small way to this Federal Government initiative.



Plate 1. The vertical silo - an icon of the wheat landscape in northern NSW. This site at Wee Waa is an example of the traditional line-side silo (storage infrastructure) constructed in the 1930s.