

Below: A crew inspect an Irish crossing in Buabua Lautoka. Photo: Fiji Roads Authority.

"THIS IS NOT WORKING  
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BY TINKERING – WE NEED  
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AND START AFRESH"



# THE ROADS TO REFORM

Writer Owen Poland

**The United States State Department warns Americans visiting Fiji that stray animals, unwary pedestrians and potholes make driving “particularly hazardous at night” – advice that no doubt resonates with Kiwi tourists.**

The animals and pedestrians might be beyond his control, but Chief Executive of the new Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), New Zealander, Neil Cook, is already well on the way to making Fiji’s roads considerably safer. Since taking up the role in January, nearly 200,000 potholes have been repaired as the new management regime moves swiftly to overcome decades of neglect.

The former Engineering Manager for the Wairoa District Council was selected through a standard international recruitment process overseen by MWH Global, which is managing the reform of Fiji’s road network (see sidebar story). MWH Roothing Network Manager, Mike Rudge, says the FRA was looking for someone around 40 years of age who had the necessary energy, and who saw the Chief Executive role as an opportunity to “make a difference” and put a significant notch on a growing career.

“We were looking for someone who could quickly grasp what the Government was trying to do, not just in the Roads Authority but wider than that. There’s no doubt in our minds that the Fiji Government was looking at this and saying, ‘If this works, we will roll it out to a few others’.”

It was that wider mandate that appealed to Mr Cook. Part of the attraction of the job from his perspective was the absolute commitment on the part of the Fiji Government to “wipe the slate clean”, start again and do it right. “I think it was an incredibly courageous move to really just put their hand up and say, ‘This is not working and it cannot be fixed by tinkering – we need to abolish the old and start afresh’.”

In addition to his core roles, Mr Cook says there’s a need to challenge other aspects of the bureaucratic process that are still “hand-braking” what he needs to do and what others need to do. They’re still dealing with the Fiji bureaucracy “all over the place” Mr Rudge says.

Given the human reticence to change, Mr Cook has made it a personal mission to point out to the Fiji Government where processes “just seem wrong” because they’re inefficient or because “no one seems really sure anymore why they were put in place in the first place”. Key examples are the duplication and triplication of function. “You can’t fight every battle, but it’s important to me that we do pick the odd battle and fight it hard

to help the Government with their reform agenda.”

Interestingly, Mr Cook sees many parallels between his new role and the one he left behind in Wairoa. For starters, the nature of the road networks are similar in terms of terrain, the mix of sealed and unsealed roads, the constrained resources and the need to be innovative in how those resources are applied.

What’s different is the fact the FRA is effectively a “start up” operation, albeit with a good foundation laid by MWH Global. Though when he arrived in January – through no fault of MWH – Mr Cook had an early taste of Fiji’s slow moving bureaucracy. “We didn’t have computers, we didn’t have a financial management system, we didn’t have a server, we didn’t have Internet access. We literally had nothing when I first arrived.” Except a \$400 million programme, that is.

To reinforce and drive the change to a results-driven and accountable industry, the FRA was conceived and designed as a lean management and outcome-focused organisation. While Mr Cook has been involved in getting the FRA established and setting the strategic outlook, MWH continues to provide technical and network management support to help the FRA to achieve its goals.

While their roles may be different, Messrs Rudge and Cook derive the same pleasure from being able to make a difference. “We see little things every day which keep us going through a lot of the hard nights that we have to spend working,” Mr Rudge says.

Judging by their banter, they share a similar outlook. Mr Rudge says they have a very complementary, integrated management style. “Fiji time doesn’t apply to the Fiji Roads Authority,” Mr Cook says, adding that the expatriates are all there for the right reasons. “It’s all about making the boat go faster.”

According to Mr Rudge, the radical reform of Fiji’s road network couldn’t come soon enough. Plagued by corruption and incompetence, the old Department of National Roads regime had resulted in a substantial backlog of deferred maintenance and unsafe bridges that were responsible for unacceptably high risk to road users. “Had it been left much longer, it would have been almost impossible to get on top of the situation because of the accelerating rate of deterioration.”

“WE’RE NOT HERE JUST TO FIX ROADS, IT’S NOT ABOUT THAT. WE’VE GOT TO ACTUALLY FIX THE INDUSTRY THAT DELIVERS ROADING SOLUTIONS IN FIJI.”

The biggest problem was not having merit-based appointments in key roles, Mr Rudge says. “You’re simply not allowing your organisation to operate to the best that they can be because by definition you’re not getting the best person for the job each and every time.”

Disestablishing the DNR and its 1,800 staff put paid to that. Fiji’s entrenched bureaucrats had no time to disrupt or slow the process, and only about five of the around 20 employees have retained jobs in the trimmed down FRA team. Empowered by legislation, Mr Cook says his goal is to make the FRA a “flagship of accountability, transparency and efficient use of public money to deliver value”.

With asset management as its core role, Brian Sharplin from MWH’s Management Consulting division developed an integrated management approach for the new organisation. A series of manuals and systems – including staff, finance, procurement and performance management – are all aligned to the FRA legislation. They’ve enabled Mr Cook to quickly establish an organisation that he says is efficient and effective, and delivers to meet the needs of Fiji’s road users from the very start of operations.

With the new systems in place, the FRA has clear objectives and transparent justification for activities and expenditure. In addition, strong contract and procurement models enable the Authority to hold contractors accountable to meet clearly defined performance measures. However, that process hit something of a speed bump in September when Auckland-based Blacktop Construction went into receivership and left several local suppliers out of pocket.

One of three New Zealand contractors selected in 2012, Blacktop was responsible for works in Fiji’s Northern Division and Mr Cook concedes that the FRA has – if not a legal obligation – a moral obligation to help the unsecured creditors. “We’ve got a reform process that’s supposed to deliver much better outcomes, so it’s never a good look when something like this happens – so yes it’s a setback.”

Blacktop participated in a tender process that Mr Cook says was “robust”. Like any similar New Zealand organisation, the FRA has performance bonds in place to look after its own interests, but he’s had “pause for thought” around the support needed for a relatively unsophisticated supplier market. “Perhaps in an environment like Fiji there’s a place for an organisation like FRA to somehow try and look after those downstream suppliers.”

## NEW CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTS STANDARDS

|                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>NZS 3910:2013 – Construction</b>            | These new Standards were released by Standards New Zealand, October 2013. Each will require dedicated <b>Special Conditions</b> . We are offering some <b>Initial Recommended Special Conditions</b> , an opportunity to comment and take advantage of other commentaries, then a more <b>Considered Set</b> of recommended special conditions. |
| <b>NZS 3916:2013 – Design and Construction</b> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>NZS 3917:2013 – Term Maintenance</b>        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

## Firth Consultancy Limited

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Left: Knolly Street (Suva) – good practice; laying new pipes to minimise the need to dig up the newly rehabilitated road. Photo: Fiji Roads Authority.



Below: Roadworks currently underway in Suva City. Photo: Fiji Roads Authority.

The sheer enormity of the task facing the FRA is truly mind-boggling. The 1,400 kilometres of sealed roads leak badly because they haven't been resealed in a decade. Not surprisingly, large lengths of unsealed road also have no residual strength when they're wet – and it rains hard and often in Fiji. Then there are the 1,000 or so bridges, 100 of which need urgent work and another 200 that require significant work. In fact "we're still finding new bridges," Mr Rudge says.

A key priority was to provide emergency repairs to the flood ravaged roads of Vauna Levu (the Northern Island). Grading thousands of kilometres of road, filling in hundreds of thousands of potholes and road marking have also attracted the praise and goodwill of locals who've had to endure many years of expensive damage to vehicles – and fines for driving defective vehicles. Nonetheless, Mr Cook says it's going to take time to clear blocked drains and effectively divert water away from roads.

"The only thing I was ever told in my roading education was that there were three main things you've got to deal with in your roads – and that's water, water and water – yes, we're looking after drainage."

Longer term, there'll be a major reseal and rehabilitation programme across the entire network together with the replacement of unsafe bridges and improvements to traffic signals and streetlights. It's been estimated that it could take three to five years to catch up

with all the reseals required to protect roads and reduce the current levels of potholes after rain. Not that potholes are the only priority, Mr Cook says. "We're not here just to fix roads, it's not about that. We've got to actually fix the industry that delivers roading solutions in Fiji."

To that end, reforming the supply chain has been another key challenge. Mr Cook says part of the FRA's role has been to give the market confidence that it's a good client, "that we pay our bills on time, that we'll keep the cash flowing through the contractor market into the supplier market". As a result, there's already been significant investment in the sector as the industry sees what's happening and gains confidence in the Government's longer term investment plans.

As for the quality of materials and workmanship, Mr Cook says the issue wasn't so much about a lack of standards as it was the implementation of them.

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**"WE'RE HERE TO HELP FIJI REBUILD A SUSTAINABLE ROADING MANAGEMENT SECTOR AND WE'VE GOT TO HELP THEM RUN IT THEMSELVES."**

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He believes good aggregates have never been produced because they were never demanded. So whilst the quality of workmanship prior to his arrival was appalling, the standard has improved significantly. "It's just then a process of continuous improvement, continuously reinforcing to guys that this is how we do it now – do it once, do it right."

Having financially incentivised private sector contractors has also provided a source of motivation for local suppliers and contractors who have mostly responded well to the new regime. "Some of them didn't and they're going," Mr Rudge says. "We had to make a few hard calls along the way, pick a few fights," Mr Cook adds.

Not that using New Zealand contractors represents some sort of Kiwi takeover. Far from it, insists Mr Cook. "This isn't about taking work off Fijians." Of the 400-plus staff employed by the three contractors, there were only about 20 expatriates in key management positions. The important point, he says, is that all these companies are looking at this as a long-term Fijian business investment that will be run by Fijian people. "We're here to help Fiji rebuild a sustainable roading management sector and we've got to help them run it themselves."

Populating key roles within the FRA with Fijian people is one of Mr Cook's future goals, but they've only just begun to scratch the surface in terms of knowledge transfer.



Photo: MWH.



Left: Mud: a common experience on most unsealed roads. Photo: Fiji Roads Authority.

Below: A collapsed bridge. Improved designs and scheduled maintenance will decrease the failure rate of assets on the network. Photo: MWH.

Right: Stinson Parade Bridge is situated in central Suva and was closed off to the public in November 2012 to prevent anything catastrophic from happening. A workable detour is in place. Photo: Fiji Roads Authority.

MWH Global has been involved in general up-skilling through internal and external training, and Mr Rudge says there's been an "awful lot" on mentoring. "There are a lot of conversations about things you would just take for granted in New Zealand." The rewards are almost palpable. Mr Rudge says one employee told him he'd learnt more in three weeks with MWH than he'd learnt in the previous seven years in his previous job.

Learning to use compactors rather than the Fiji standard of "gumboot" compaction to fix potholes is part of the process, and Mr Cook says the FRA has longer term plans to get alongside the tertiary sector and the professional institutes to help "create that sustainable pattern into the future". Starting up a quarry association – which would be taken for granted in New Zealand – has been one initiative to help the industry learn from each other.

The knowledge transfer cuts both ways. Working in Fiji provides New Zealand engineers with a unique experience and skills to bring home. Having worked all over the world, Mr Rudge says travelling to new environments which don't have material specifications for some things forces you back to first principles. Working with different cultures and different attitudes also makes you a better manager.

"When 80 per cent of the population travels by bus, your whole approach to what is important on the road network changes and it broadens your horizons." For Fiji, the provision of roads to support

a reliable bus network boils down to one fundamental benefit: access. "You can talk about water and sewage and health outcomes all you like," Mr Cook says. "But the best thing you can do for a rural village or rural community is to give them access."

Spending only an hour or so to get to a market – rather than a day – increases productivity exponentially, something those of us in the developed world take for granted. "Roads enable economic development and when you don't have them you really understand how important they are."

Over time, Mr Cook hopes the knock-on effect will be that people can perhaps provide for their own needs in the other areas of wellbeing, "rather than relying on well meaning charities, grants and hand outs".

While there's no quick fix, Mr Rudge says the reward is in making a difference to a little community where they've just put some gravel on their road for the first time in 20 years. "They were walking through puddles to get to work every day." Another example was taking only one month to repair a badly made piece of road that took 18 months to build and which failed within six months. "People appreciate that."

Increased road safety is another significant benefit, not to mention the potential boost to tourism provided by what Mr Cook says will be "a standard of geometrics, ride and signage that they can feel safe and comfortable exploring Fiji on".

## "BUT THE BEST THING YOU CAN DO FOR A RURAL VILLAGE OR RURAL COMMUNITY IS TO GIVE THEM ACCESS."

Having spent seven years in Wairoa, Mr Cook has developed a keen sense of community which will sustain him in his new role. As one of New Zealand's poorest and most deprived socio-economic regions, he says Fiji is similar to Wairoa – but on a much larger scale. There's no point, he says, in having the most magnificent road in the world if it's not delivering better outcomes for the people that are supposed to be using it. "You've got to be really conscious that it is about people, and what we're trying to deliver are better outcomes for the people of Fiji."

The "game changing" Fiji project is also generating interest elsewhere in the region. MWH Global says the new systems, processes and objectives in Fiji are being noted by other governments, including Papua New Guinea, which is increasingly focusing on its infrastructure as its economy continues to grow at one of the fastest rates in Asia Pacific. ■



## TRANSFORMATIONAL REFORM

**The task of transforming Fiji's road network was led by MWH Global after accepting a \$25 million contract to reform the country's road governance and operational practices.**

MWH acted initially as a change manager helping the Fiji Government create the new Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) in 2012 and make key recruitments. The role then morphed in 2013 into a more traditional network management and principal consultant role.

MWH Rooding Network Manager, New Zealander Mike Rudge, is overseeing the five-year management contract and says "this is easily the most rewarding job I've had; it's easily the hardest job I've had too".

Disestablishing the Department of National Roads (DNR) was a decisive and "brave" move according to Mr Rudge, who says the speed of change was world leading because it caught Fiji's entrenched bureaucracy unawares. "The corruption and bureaucracy had no chance to catch up. They tried very hard; that's the world-leading bit."

Mr Rudge led a transitional phase which involved merging the activities of the Department of National Roads as well as 13 municipal authorities, the sugar cane industry and Ministry of Provincial development. Along the way it also carried out the planning and management of maintenance and construction activities for a road network that includes 10,000 kilometres of sealed and unsealed roads, around 1,000 bridges and 44 jetties. 

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