

## FOREWORD

Taranaki Regional Council established the State Highway 3 Working Party in 2002 in response to ongoing concerns about the route security, safety and efficiency of the section of State Highway 3 (SH3) between Taranaki and Waikato. In particular, there has been a focus on the section of SH3 between Piopio and New Plymouth.

For some years this section of the state highway network has been of considerable concern to local Taranaki and Waikato communities, as well as road users travelling between the regions. Severe weather events and heavy goods vehicle accidents have resulted in frequent road closures or restricted operation of the highway, contributing to negative perceptions of the route. Particular sections of this state highway at risk are Mount Messenger, the Uruti Valley and Awakino Gorge. These areas also have very poor cellular phone coverage which compounds safety and operational issues when incidents do occur.

Increasing public complaints therefore called for action to improve the standard and reliability of the route, with the first meeting of the SH3 Working Party (the Working Party) held on 26 August 2002, comprising both regional councils and identified stakeholders.

A higher level strategic group known as the SH3 Working Party Steering Group (the Steering Group) has since been established to assist the Working Party at a higher strategic level. The first meeting of the Steering Group was held on 27 July 2011. Members of this group include Regional Transport Committee Chairs from both regions, programme managers from both regions and the relevant regional directors of the NZ Transport Agency.

A booklet reviewing the work of the SH3 Working Party was produced in 2007 by the then Chair of the Taranaki Regional Council Chair, David Walter. This booklet is an update of that previous resource, compiled in partnership by the Taranaki and Waikato regional councils on behalf of the SH3 Working Party. It focuses on the work of the SH3 Working Party and the improvements made to the route during its time. Please note that this booklet is not intended to duplicate work undertaken elsewhere, rather reference is made within this document to specific reports and studies undertaken on the route. In particular, the reader is directed to *The Road Ahead: Economic Development Study on SH3 North* for more detailed information on this important transport link.

July 2014

Word doc # 1034797\_v6

PDF doc # 1374672



# CONTENTS

- Foreword ..... 1
- Contents ..... 3
- The Route ..... 4
  - Map ..... 5
  - Key characteristics..... 6
  - Key issues ..... 7
- The SH3 Working Party..... 9
  - Background to establishment of the SH3 Working Party..... 9
  - Meetings of the SH3 Working Party ..... 10
  - Organisations involved..... 10
  - Key benefits of the SH3 Working Party ..... 10
- Review of route issues..... 11
  - Securing funding for major improvements ..... 11
  - Passing opportunities ..... 12
  - The Awakino Gorge and Mount Messenger sections of SH3 ..... 14
  - Other route improvements – shape corrections, surface rehabilitation etc ..... 16
  - Route security and safety – road closures and serious crashes..... 18
  - Cellular phone coverage and lifeline issues ..... 19
  - Improved publicity/profile for the route..... 20
  - Negative perceptions of the route ..... 21
- Relevance of the Working Party today..... 21
- Conclusion ..... 22
- Studies undertaken ..... 22
- Past and present members of the Working Party..... 23
- Terms of Reference ..... 25
- Completed Major Improvements 2001-2014 ..... 29
- Maps - Cell phone coverage and serious crashes ..... 30
- Maps - Passing lanes and serious crashes ..... 32
- Maps - Road works and serious crashes ..... 34

## THE ROUTE

State Highway 3 (SH3) between Hamilton and New Plymouth follows the coast from New Plymouth north to Mokau where it crosses the Mokau River and winds inland, eventually meeting SH4 and SH30 near Te Kuiti.

The section between Urenui and Piopio is of particular concern for the Working Party and community, with the terrain and weather conditions often combining to threaten route security in this area. These parts of the inter-regional corridor are windy, narrow and widely regarded as inadequate; with two major constraints for users at Mount Messenger and the Awakino Gorge (refer Figure 1). It is also an area with relatively high crash rates. Crashes are the leading cause of SH3 closures, however slips are common in the Awakino Gorge which also result in closures to the highway. These route closures disrupt existing traffic, and undermine people's perceptions about transport security to and from Taranaki as a whole.

Network resilience is reduced in an event (such as a slip or crash) because:

- There are few or no convenient alternative routes to deviate around an incident for much of the distance.
- The distance to emergency services is significant causing slow response times.
- Cell phone and radio coverage is limited on those sections of the route most prone to events, hampering emergency services' effectiveness.



SH3 near Tongaporutu looking south to Mt Taranaki

# Map



Figure 1: Map showing the section of the SH3 corridor which is the focus of the Working Party, including the political boundaries and general topography

## Key characteristics

SH3 between Hamilton and New Plymouth has a number of key characteristics that dictate its difference to other main inter-regional land transport routes. These include:

- It is the only arterial inter-regional route that directly connects Taranaki to the North.
- It ensures that agricultural, oil and gas, and other products important to the regional and national economy, get to processing and manufacturing sites and from there to national and international markets.
- Although the route is scenic, it passes through high risk terrain, with slips common in the Awakino Gorge.
- A high proportion of the vehicles that use this route are heavy commercial vehicles (HCV's), carrying everything from heavy machinery to chemicals, domestic milk consumption supplies, fuel supplies, logging, feed supplements, fertilisers and livestock. All of the LPG supplied to the Golden Triangle (Auckland, Tauranga and Hamilton – which involves an average of 70 trucks per week) travels via this strategic route.
- It allows Taranaki's heavy engineering industry to transport product both domestically and internationally.
- Trucking company stakeholders and other industry representatives that deal with large industrial equipment note that the route is difficult for HCV's. Trucking industry costs are up to 30% higher on SH3 north (for normal travel) compared to other routes.<sup>1</sup>
- The route has limited network resilience to an event such as a crash or slip for several reasons – few alternative routes, distance to emergency services is significant, cell phone and radio coverage is limited.
- There is often conflict between cars and HCV's, with minimal opportunities for safe overtaking, particularly between Mount Messenger and the north end of the Awakino Gorge, and through the Uruti Valley.



Motunui methanol plant on SH3 north of New Plymouth



SH3 along Taranaki's northern coastline



Large loads being carried on SH3

<sup>1</sup> *The Road Ahead: Economic Development Study on State Highway 3 North* prepared by NZIER for Venture Taranaki (Sep 2012).

## Key issues

The *Regional Land Transport Strategy for Taranaki 2011-2041* identifies route **security and reliability** of this section of the State Highway network as a vital issue in ensuring that both goods and people can be transported to, from and within the region efficiently and safely. As the road traverses some difficult terrain considerable challenges are in place for the road controlling and funding authority in providing a road to the standards and of the reliability that many in the community perceive as necessary and appropriate. The road has **limited passing lanes and passing opportunities**



Fonterra milk tanker on approach to SH3 Mount Messenger tunnel

and combined with a high percentage of heavy vehicles results in slow travel times and ultimately a high number of crashes.

There is also a perception that the **susceptibility to closure** and the historically tortuous nature of parts of SH3 make the Taranaki region appear remote and cut off from the north of the North Island. One particular location that has helped perpetuate this perception is the Awakino Gorge where occasional crashes attract extensive media attention. This perception has negative effects on regional economic activity, resulting in lower visitor numbers than may otherwise be the case, and less industrial activity.



Trucks meeting on Mount Messenger

Mount Messenger is also seen as contributing to slow travel times. The NZ Transport Agency has undertaken an investigation in the past into possible alternative routes around Mount Messenger, however to date no decision has been made for such a major reconstruction, as all options were extremely costly. The Government's *Regional Economic Activity Report* released in May 2013 identified resilience improvements to SH3 over Mount Messenger as essential to ensure Taranaki's economic progress.

A **number of problem areas** have been identified for possible shape correction or curve improvements, realignments, resealing or reconstruction. The quality of the road surface and seal widths is also perceived as substandard, contributing to poor travel comfort, vehicle wear and tear and crashes.

New Plymouth hosts a number of national musical, horticultural, sporting and other entertainment events attracting thousands of visitors, where reliability of SH3 can influence attendance.

The impact of significant changes to the quantity and type of cargo being moved through **Port Taranaki** is of key relevance to SH3, as is the resilience of SH3 to the success of the significant investments made in the Port. As it is New Zealand's second largest export port and the only deep water export port on New Zealand's west coast, Port Taranaki has the potential for sustained ongoing growth likely to place substantial demand on roading infrastructure. The continuing growth of Port Taranaki will need sound arterial routes connecting it to neighbouring regions if the maximum social and economic benefits of port developments are to be realised.



Port Taranaki, New Plymouth

Despite its importance to the Taranaki and Waikato regions SH3 north of New Plymouth has

always **struggled to gain the funding necessary** to make a significant difference to levels of service on the route. Key **lifeline issues** are involved with this section of SH3 as it has a history of road closures due to its surrounding topography and limited access points. The effect is that Taranaki is significantly constrained in realising future economic and social goals in part because of the state of this route, which is compounded by the difficult terrain involved and resulting high development costs. This route is essential for



December 2009 slip on SH3 south of Mokau

Taranaki's future economic and social well-being and makes a significant contribution to the regional and national economy. It remains a difficult stretch of road on which there is a need for continuous improvement.



Taranaki's oil and gas industry at work - Kupe Production Station at dawn



# THE SH3 WORKING PARTY

## Background to establishment of the SH3 Working Party

- For many years the section of SH3 between Waikato and Taranaki has been of considerable concern to the Taranaki community and road users travelling to and from the region. Heavy rain, floods or severe storm events have resulted in frequent road closures and/or restricted operation of the highway.
- In 1997 a washout at Awakino closed the highway for a week. In 1998 massive slumping on Stockman's Hill near Mahoenui resulted in traffic being diverted through an alternative route for four months. Slips, flooding and accidents were the primary cause of 32 road closures over this section of SH3 during the six-year period between 28 December 1992 and 22 December 1998. Particular sections at risk were Mount Messenger, the Uruti Valley and Awakino Gorge.
- Increasing public complaints called for action to improve the standard and reliability of the route.
- In 1997 Taranaki Regional Councillor Barry Marsh organised a petition to the New Zealand parliament submitting: *that Parliament take note of the appalling condition of the main road north from New Plymouth (State Highway 3), especially the Mimi to Tongaporutu and Mokau to Mahoenui sections*'. This petition was signed by 17,500 people.
- Prior to the 1999 general election, Cr Marsh also met the then Leader of the Opposition Helen Clarke, who acknowledged that SH3 was of strategic importance to the region and New Zealand, was of poor standard, and urgently needed upgrading. The following day Cr Marsh met with then leader of the Alliance Party Jim Anderton, who also acknowledged the importance of SH3 to the region and nation, and agreed that the highway was of poor standard and needed to be upgraded.
- In 1999, the Taranaki Regional Council commissioned an investigation into the strategic value and importance of SH3. The study included an analysis of the costs to road users and to the Taranaki region of road closures caused by slips and flooding on this stretch of state highway. It also considered the effects of the standard and reliability of the road on the perception of Taranaki as an economic centre and tourist destination. At the time the report was written it was suspected that the strategic importance of the highway had been insufficiently recognised when considering road funding allocations. The study's key overarching finding was that there was a case for greater priority to be accorded to works on SH3, based on the national strategic value of the highway.
- In 1999 Transit completed a study of the Mokau to New Plymouth section of the highway, including the Mount Messenger section (another area of SH3 that continues to pose a risk to the security of the region's main northern link).
- In September 2000 Transit undertook a study of SH3 from Hamilton to 2km south of the Mokau River Bridge. Although the study area was not within the Taranaki region, this section of SH3 is of vital importance to Taranaki and includes the Awakino Gorge and Tunnel (two areas along the highway that continue to pose a risk to the security of the region's main northern link). The study identified and costed development strategies for a number of 'problem sites' between Te Kuiti and Mokau.
- As a result of both of these reports, the Taranaki Regional Council's Regional Land Transport Committee resolved to approach Environment Waikato and Waitomo District Council with the

object of forming a joint committee to ascertain priorities for road maintenance and construction projects on SH3 and a focus on the northern section of the route. The New Plymouth District Council, Western Central Road Transport Association and Transit New Zealand were subsequently requested to join the Working Party.

- The first meeting of the Working Party was held on 26 August 2002.

## Meetings of the SH3 Working Party

- Since the inaugural meeting on 26 August 2002, the SH3 Working Party has generally met bi-annually, with meetings usually alternating between Awakino and Piopio. Despite some challenges in identifying suitable dates, meetings have generally been well attended and are of around two hours duration.
- Understandably there have been some changes of membership representing the various organisations over the twelve years. Key past and present representatives on the Working Party are listed later in this booklet.
- The current Terms of Reference for the Working Party and its Steering Group, which includes the specific objectives and methods of these groups, are provided at the end of this booklet.
- Analysis of Working Party Minutes from 2003-2013 have been analysed and provided useful information for this booklet.

## Organisations involved

Membership of the State Highway 3 Working Party comprises appropriate representatives from the following organisations:

- Taranaki Regional Council
- Waikato Regional Council
- New Plymouth District Council
- Waitomo District Council
- New Zealand Transport Agency<sup>2</sup>
- The New Zealand Automobile Association
- Western Central Road Transport Association
- New Zealand Police
- Roading maintenance contractors e.g. Transfield Services, Downers

## Key benefits of the SH3 Working Party

- Close liaison between Taranaki and Waikato politicians, council officers and roading officials.
- Collective identification and prioritisation of projects and improvements to the route, providing a more seamless approach.
- Formulation of submissions to Waikato and Taranaki Regional Transport Committees, the NZ Transport Agency and the Ministry of Transport.

---

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the NZ Transport Agency is part of Central Government and therefore does not participate in advocacy for improvement, but rather listens to concerns, gives advice and provides information.

- Updates from, and constructive feedback to, the NZ Transport Agency and the contractors maintaining the route.
- Combined advocacy to central government and other agencies/organisations, such as telecommunications companies, for improvements along the route.

## REVIEW OF ROUTE ISSUES

The following provides a brief review against the main route issues since the establishment of the SH3 Working Party in 2002.

Reference should be made to the map of completed improvements provided at the end of this booklet.

### Securing funding for major improvements

Of ongoing frustration to the Working Party is the continual deferment of funding for construction of passing lanes and other improvements – largely due to altering criteria and priorities for funding state highway capital works. In recent years, National funding has been strongly focused towards Roads of National Significance (RoNS), with the result being that other highways, including SH3, have struggled to gain funding support for significant improvements.

Following the establishment of the R (Regional) Fund in 2004, it seemed new passing lanes on this stretch of SH3 could not be funded from the N (National) Fund. However, with the majority of passing lanes sought being within the Waikato region, there was an obvious challenge to secure a share of the Waikato R-Fund. The Taranaki Regional Transport Committee then agreed to spend some of the R-Fund allocation to their region on SH3 projects beyond their northern boundary. In September 2006 the SH3 Working Party agreed to seek a 50/50 joint arrangement accessing both Waikato and Taranaki R-Funds for additional passing lanes, plus a major realignment between the Awakino Hotel and the Junction Service Station. This innovative joint arrangement (50/50) was seen by the Working Party as an equitable solution to generate funds for the construction of additional passing lanes and other major improvements.



Awakino Tunnel

With the end of the ten-year R Fund mechanism in 2015, the Working Party has discussed and advocated for a replacement scheme for heartland regions who struggle to compete with the metros to access national funding support for capital improvements. The Taranaki Regional Council led a representative group which made representations to the Minister of Transport, Gerry Brownlee, in 2013. The Minister requested information on projects from each area that would benefit from extra funds but were unlikely to be funded from N

Funding pools. In April 2014 the Chair of the Taranaki Regional Transport Committee held a one-on-one meeting with the Minister of Transport discussing potential criteria of any replacement fund which could be used to address the funding gap for roads that have similar problems with funding and are not able to meet the eligibility for N Funding pools.

Working Party members (with the exception of the Transport Agency) have been involved in ongoing lobbying of local Members of Parliament, along with arranging site visits along the route for politicians and Transport Agency staff to understand the difficulties that the route presents. Staff of both the Waikato and Taranaki regional councils continue to advocate for road improvements with advice from Transport Agency staff members.

Frustration with attempts to secure the investment required to remove the constraints posed by SH3 to Taranaki's economic growth led to the Working Party initiating an economic study of the route. This is distinct from the range of roading studies/reports undertaken previously. Venture Taranaki was approached and the outcome was the September 2012 release of *The Road Ahead: Economic Development Study on State Highway 3 North* prepared by NZIER for Venture Taranaki. This report presents a business case for the development of SH3, addressing its constraints, realistic investment options to remedy them, and details on the results of such interventions. It also stresses the point of difference to other roads, notably the servicing of the oil and gas industry based in Taranaki. Subsequent to the release of the Venture Taranaki report, both Venture Taranaki and the Taranaki Regional Council presented to the Waikato Regional Council on the outcomes of the study and the importance of SH3 to both regions, as well as New Zealand.



Construction of Awakino northbound passing lane

Investment concerns may be at least partly addressed by Government announcements in June 2014 of specific project funding and contestable funds which are targeted at regional New Zealand being available from mid 2015.

## Passing opportunities

The paucity of passing lanes was earlier identified as a major constraint, and the need for more is accentuated by the lack of passing opportunities. Given the broken and hilly terrain through which SH3 passes, along with the fact that heavy goods vehicles comprise almost one in five vehicles on this section, can give rise to driver frustration leading to potential crashes. Impatience is compounded now with a growing number of campervans and caravans travelling the route.

At an early meeting in February 2003 the Working Party prioritised three key sites for additional passing lanes; south of Piopio, north of Awakino Tunnel, and on Mangaotaki Hill. All of these had previously been identified in the 1999 *Transit New Zealand Hamilton to Mokau SH3 Strategy Study*. A Transit New Zealand media release from the Wanganui Regional Office dated 30 June 2003 stated: *'About 18 months ago the SH3 Working Party was established to address concerns on the highway north of New Plymouth, especially the stretch from Mount Messenger to Te Kuiti. Its submissions have been rewarded by the inclusion of three passing lanes for construction over the next three years.'*

A September 2003 report to Taranaki Regional Council from the Contract Manager of Transfield Services, gave details of a passing lane review that recommended progressing three sites to the investigation stage. They were Piopio South southbound, Waitora Station southbound (substituted at that time for Mangaotaki) and Awakino Tunnel North northbound. The Transfield report also summarised: *'The overall highway is characterised by numerous bends and crests with relatively poor sight distance along much of the route, which provides few suitable locations to provide safe passing opportunities. Furthermore the relatively narrow highway provides few locations to safely pull over to let other vehicles pass. This results in a build up of traffic and increased driver frustration. The high percentage of heavy traffic causes driver frustration and this serves to increase the need for passing opportunities.'*

On 24 March 2006 the *Taranaki Daily News* headlined an article on SH3 'Lobby group worried road work in the slow lane'. The article summarised the concerns of the Working Party at the frustrating lack of progress in constructing passing lanes. At a meeting that month the Working Party had given top priority to a passing lane north of Awakino Gorge tunnel, but seven others prioritised were on Meads Hill, Mangaotaki Hill, Wharekauri Road, Haehanga Road, Hanna's Curve, Tikitiki and in Awakino Gorge.

The 2007 review noted that the lack of progress in constructing additional passing lanes in this section of SH3 was without doubt the major issue of ongoing frustration to the Working Party, motorists and the wider Taranaki community. Prior to the completion of a passing lane south of Piopio in 2005, a stretch of 94 km was without a southbound passing lane. At the time of the previous review in 2007, this was the only new passing lane that had been completed, despite a number having historically been promised and programmed; though construction of a new passing lane north of Awakino Tunnel had recently commenced.

The Working Party is pleased to note that the following passing lanes have since been completed:

- 2007 – Passing lane north of Awakino Tunnel completed

The 900m-long northbound passing lane constructed directly north of the Awakino Tunnel eased frustration for drivers stuck behind heavy vehicles while traversing the Awakino Gorge, increased efficiency in the operation of SH3 by reducing travel times and congestion, and improved the geometric alignment.



Awakino North Passing Lane (2007)

- 2008 – Mangaotaki south passing lane completed

Historically, the lack of safe passing opportunities between Te Kuiti and New Plymouth caused driver frustration and many overtaking-related crashes. This 1km section of SH3, located on a steep southbound incline, made it a good candidate for the construction of a passing lane.



Mangaotaki South Passing Lane (2008)

- 2009 – Meads Hill passing lane completed

The Meads Hill Passing Lane provides passing opportunities for traffic travelling up the steep incline immediately adjacent to the former family farm of rugby legend, Sir Colin Meads.



Meads Hill Passing Lane (2009)

All improvements to passing opportunities on the route are welcomed. However, as noted in the 2012 *The Road Ahead* report there remains “an extended stretch (79km northbound and some 65km southbound) with no passing lanes between Mount Messenger and Awakino Gorge and only limited lengths of safe passing opportunities.”

While the construction of two passing lanes between Mokau and New Plymouth was prioritised highly within the 2012-15 *Regional Land Transport Programme* by the Taranaki Regional Transport Committee, this was unsuccessful in gaining funding support from the National Land Transport Fund. In recent years, national funding has been strongly focused towards Roads of National Significance (RoNS), with the result being that other highways have struggled to gain funding support for significant improvements.

### The Awakino Gorge and Mount Messenger sections of SH3

The sections of SH3 which negotiate Mount Messenger and the Awakino Gorge continue to be a focus for the Working Party.

SH3 through **Mount Messenger** continues to be a challenging route due to the topography and weather-related events.

- In the summer of 2011 loss of traction on steep gradients led to a Road Transport Association campaign supported by the Working Party. The result was a \$1M resurfacing job of sections of the road over Mount Messenger being undertaken in February 2011.
- The northern approach to the tunnel and the passing lane on the southern side were widened in 2011.
- The Transport Agency advised in mid-2013 that they were shortly to install variable message signs (VMS) to ensure motorists are warned about adverse conditions or any closures or delays up ahead. At the time of writing it was advised that a VMS would be going in on SH3 just north of the 3A junction early in 2015.

The nationwide *Regional Economic Development Report* released by the Government in May 2013 identified improvements to the road over Mount Messenger as essential to ensure Taranaki's economic progress.

In 2006 Transit NZ agreed to undertake a new scoping study of the **Awakino Gorge section** of SH3 with a view to further identifying potential improvements, including:

- Awakino Tunnel Enlargement (progressed in April 2011)
- Awakino Northbound Passing Lane (progressed in 2007)
- Hanna's Curve Easing
- Awakino Tunnel Realignment
- North of Awakino Tunnel Realignment
- Bexley Station Realignment
- Awakino Hairpin Realignment
- Awakino Tunnel South Realignment

While the SH3 Working Party supports this and other such studies, previous strategic studies have been commissioned, with limited results in the way of funding and consequent construction of major improvements.



Awakino North Realignment (2009)

The most important project to the Taranaki region at the time of the previous review in 2007 was ensuring that the Awakino North Realignment project was progressed in a timely and cost effective manner. This project involved realignment and river protection of the section of SH3 between the Awakino Hotel and the Junction Service Station – having existing substandard vertical/horizontal curves, a narrow pavement width and river erosion threats.

The realignment, located approximately 90km north of New Plymouth and 150km south of Hamilton, was completed in 2009 and has improved road user safety (reducing the number of curves from 11 to 5), reduced travel times, and made the road a lot less susceptible to slips and subsequent closures.

## Other route improvements – shape corrections, surface rehabilitation etc

- Numerous lengths of pavement rehabilitation, generally including road widening, have been completed since 2002.

### Example - Mokau North Rehabilitation (2007)

A rehabilitation involving shape correction, shoulder slope improvements, and seal widening was carried out on this section of SH3, north of Mokau.



- The Working Party has been involved in discussions around the work programme improvements required to open the route up for High Productivity Motor Vehicles (HPMV), along with identifying growth in freight categories.
- Discussion on the identification and prioritisation of high risk sites along the highway by the Transport Agency and contractors.
- Significant minor improvements have been completed since the Working Party began. These have included road stabilisation, corner widening, intersection realignments, safety projects (including 'Truckies Corner' realignment in Awakino Gorge), signage improvements, better drainage and vegetation control, etc.

### Example - Piopio Sightline Improvement (2004)

Sight-distances were markedly improved on the approach to the Piopio South Passing Lane, and hazardous poplar trees were removed on outside of same curve.





### Example - Awakino Gorge Guardrail (2006)

The guardrail was installed at the location of a number of crashes, and protects the corner for a distance of approximately 400m. There was also some replacement of square kerbing with radial.



### Mangaotaki Rockfall (2008)

Heavy rain triggered a large rock fall on 4th August 2008 at the Mangaotaki Bluffs. The large rocks blocked SH3 for almost 48hrs and a route detour through local council roads was required during this time.



- Two stock truck effluent disposal facilities have been built along the route, one in each of the regions – the Taranaki one at Ahititi on the northern side of Mount Messenger in 2004, and the Waikato one adjacent to the Te Kuiti Sale Yards in March 2014.

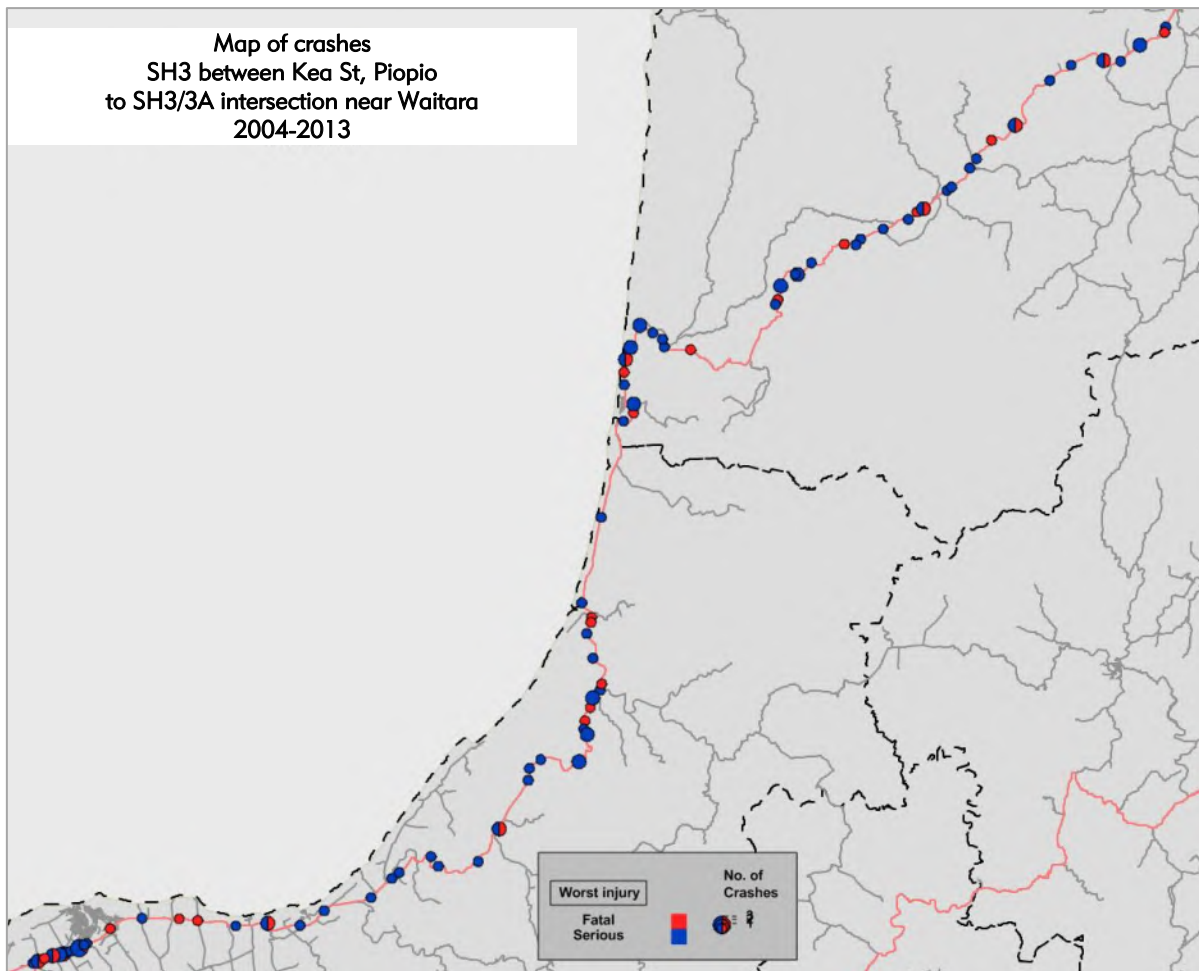
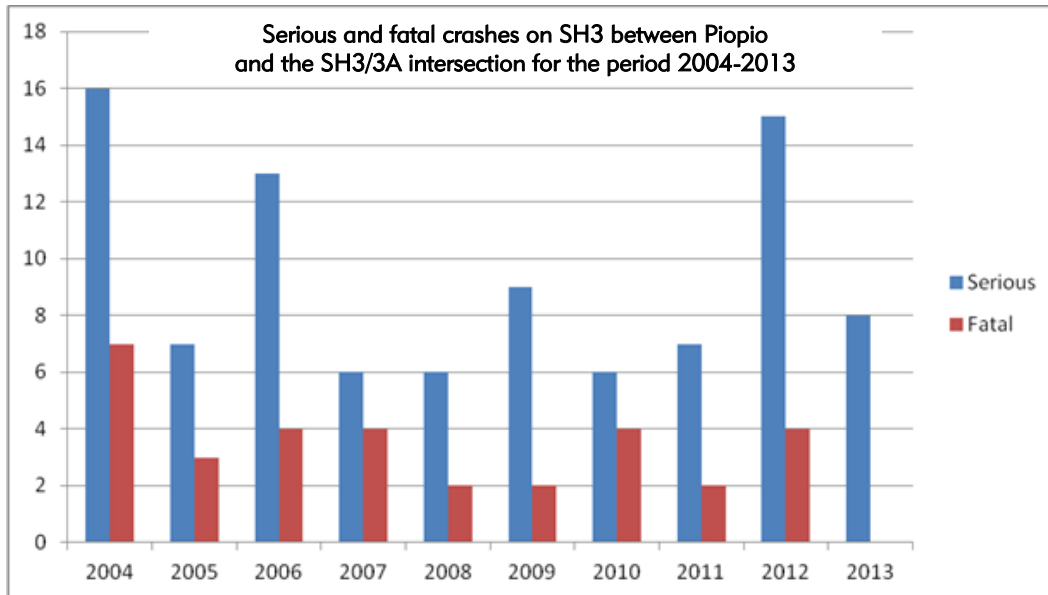


Ahititi stock truck effluent site

Provision of these facilities helps to avoid effluent being spilled onto the highway from stock trucks when the holding tanks are deliberately discharged or accidentally overflow. These sorts of discharges can cause traffic crashes if they make roads slippery or spatter onto windscreens, as well as posing health and environmental hazards.

## Route security and safety – road closures and serious crashes

The available data for SH3 shows that there remains an unacceptably high number of **deaths and serious injuries** on the route. The following map and graph show fatal and serious crashes along just that section of SH3 between Kea St, Piopio and SH3/3A near Waitara within the period 2004–2013. Further maps at the end of this booklet show the location of serious crashes relative to cell phone coverage, passing lanes and road works.



With an average of seven closures a year during the last ten years, **closure incidents** through the route continue to be a major ongoing concern. The most common cause of closures during this time was truck crashes, followed by car crashes and incidents resulting from environmental factors such as flooding and slips.

As the only direct state highway route between Hamilton and New Plymouth, closures of SH3 can impact significantly on the ability of state highway traffic to complete their journeys, due to the long detours that this necessitates. In particular, the 120km section of SH3 between Urenui and its intersection with SH4 near Te Kuiti has no alternative state highway connections, or local road connections of a comparable standard. Due to the physical constraints on SH3, the ability to turn around trucks is limited, which creates additional problems.

Overall, there does appear to have been a reduced number of road closures since 2002, though difficulties with incident responses persist and the Working Party continues to advocate for improved incident response management. The Working Party has similarly been involved in discussions regarding the maintenance contracts for the highway, including advocating for a Mokau depot.

#### **Mangaotaki Bluffs rockfall (2014)**

Sections of SH3 are vulnerable to rockfall which can pose a serious threat to travellers. In March 2014, one such rockfall had tragic consequences – taking the life of a Taranaki woman. A second rockfall in the same area just a few weeks later narrowly missed a vehicle.



**Blasting as part of rock stabilisation works at Mangaotaki Bluffs in May 2014**

### **Cellular phone coverage and lifeline issues**

The roading issues of SH3 are seriously compounded by the poor to non-existent cell phone coverage along a significant stretch of the highway between Urenui and Piopio. This gives rise to delays in contacting emergency services and/or contractors in the event of vehicular crashes or road blockages. It is not uncommon for assistance in such events having to rely on a series of relayed messages, which naturally results in delays and confused messages which jeopardise safety and security along the route – as well as undermining people’s perceptions about transport security to and from Taranaki as a whole.

SH3 is the only road access to Waikato hospital which provides special health services for Taranaki people. There is no regular air service link.

The difficult road combined with poor cell phone coverage also makes clearing crash sites and getting traffic moving again an ongoing frustration for the Police, contractors and all road users. Better cell phone coverage on SH3 would aid things significantly and without doubt improve safety outcomes as well as delays on this strategic inter-regional corridor.

Improvements to cell phone coverage have remained a matter of ongoing advocacy for the Working Party, which has promoted the issue over the years with both telecommunications companies and central government – focus in recent times being the Minister for Communications and Information Technology.

- 2009 saw a new Vodafone site improving coverage in Mokau, following prolonged advocacy on a range of fronts and including a 7500 signature petition organised by Bell Block truck driver Chris O’Connor.

- A Telecom site on Taumatamairi Road went live in March 2013, improving coverage along the Awakino Gorge. Telecom currently have no plans to expand coverage at Mount Messenger, with the challenging topography and lack of existing infrastructure making it difficult to form a business case to do so.

### Access to the Maui gas pipeline

The Maui gas pipeline, which runs from the Maui production station at Oaonui in Taranaki to the Huntly Power Station in Waikato, feeds gas to much of the North Island. SH3 provides vital access to maintain this critically important pipeline, as was demonstrated in October 2011 when a break in the pipeline near White Cliffs in north Taranaki meant that it had to be shut down. The outage curtailed supply of gas to large parts of the North Island for five days, which was a nationally significant event, costing millions of dollars and crippling commercial, manufacturing and agricultural operations in the upper North Island. The outage was estimated by BERL to have cost the economy \$200M. The possibility of SH3 being unusable at the same time as a Maui pipeline outage is a nationally significant risk.

### Improved publicity/profile for the route

The SH3 Working Party initially agreed on the need to improve the publicity and profile of the route, both to encourage more visitor traffic and thereby economic benefits for Taranaki and Waitomo District. Higher traffic volumes could also attract greater funding for improvements.

Representatives of the Taranaki and Waikato regional tourism organisations were subsequently invited to meetings, along with the New Zealand Automobile Association. Latterly Venture Taranaki, the regional Economic Development Agency (taking over the tourism role from Destination Taranaki in 2004), has been an important link for the Working Party. The SH3 Working Party has issued a number of media releases to raise the profile on issues on the SH3 route.

The New Zealand Automobile Association (AA) has been a regular attendee at SH3 Working Party meetings, and has been supportive of the aims of the group. There have been positive moves to include/improve the profile of this section of SH3 in touring brochures etc., and AA staff at various locations have been updated on features of the route.

Destination Taranaki devoted considerable resources towards establishing a SH3 touring route named the 'Sunset Highway' between Ngaruawahia and the lower North Island. Agreement was reached with most local authorities bordering the proposed route, but not with those promoting an alternative route through the Ruapehu, Wanganui and Rangitikei districts. This alternative route was to have been funded from a MRI (Major Regional Initiative) programme from central government. After some discussions with the proponents of the MRI tourism route, Venture Taranaki finally decided to abandon the 'Sunset Highway' proposal, as the 'overlapping' routes (i.e. Sunset Highway and 'alternative MRI' route) created a situation where there was a lack of united commitment from all local authorities along the route to commit to the Sunset Highway proposal, and there was also a lack of sufficient funding commitment from the local authorities to resource the initiative e.g. for signage, route promotion etc.

In view of this, the SH3 Working Party agreed that there was a need for a promotional brochure on SH3 between Waitomo/Te Kuiti and New Plymouth. This would replace an outdated brochure produced by Tourism Taranaki almost 20 years ago, and feature the diversity and scenic attributes of the route. One suggested name was 'The Great Western Drive'. Action is still required to develop and produce this recommendation.

Overall, there have been a series of initiatives promoting the highway as a tourism route throughout the time of the Working Party. In recent times the focus of the Working Party has shifted more towards the safety and reliability aspects of the route, in the knowledge that improving these aspects and public perception of the route makes it more likely to be used for tourism purposes.

While there is a need to promote and profile SH3, there is an equal need to have a greater commitment for roading and telecommunications improvement which will increase safety perceptions of the route.

### Negative perceptions of the route

While anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a more positive perception of the Te Kuiti to New Plymouth section of SH3 in 2014 than that held in the late-1990s following highway closures, delays and a higher accident rate, there remains ongoing concern expressed by the community and industry alike. SH3 North remains widely acknowledged as Taranaki’s Achilles heel, and is subject to editorial comment as such from time to time.

26 March 2014 – release by the NZ Transport Agency of the country’s 100 worst intersections, identified SH3 north of New Plymouth as having three of the country’s most dangerous intersections within a 15km stretch of road (between Bell Block to Waitara).



### RELEVANCE OF THE WORKING PARTY TODAY

Periodically, the role and relevance of the Working Party is revisited, along with its associated Terms of Reference. The long-term aim is to ensure sufficient improvements are made to this inter-regional corridor so that there is no longer a need for the Working Party to exist.

As outlined in this review, a number of improvements have been made to the route in recent years, including corner straightening, new passing lanes, widening of the Awakino Tunnel and better signage. However, while these improvements have been beneficial, more are needed (particularly on the section of SH3 within the Taranaki region).

To this end, the Working Party will continue to work together in the interests of improving the section of SH3 between New Plymouth and Hamilton for the foreseeable future.

## CONCLUSION

The brief history captured in this report does not describe all improvements carried out on SH3 since 2002, however it is clear that some major road works have been completed (refer to map at the end of this booklet), enabling a safer journey for motorists and goods and service vehicles.

With severe funding restrictions, a safer, more reliable journey on SH3 is still a long way off, especially between Piopio and the intersection of SH3 and 3A. Route security, safety and efficiency, lack of passing lanes and passing opportunities, rock slips and minimal cell phone coverage continue to be key challenges for the Working Party.

The purpose of this booklet was to update the previous history of the SH3 Working Party, by providing a snapshot of activities over the last twelve years. It is noted that a number of historical issues remain, where the Working Party will continue to advocate for an improved and safer road environment, better telecommunication coverage and better recognition by the Government of this very important state highway.

## STUDIES UNDERTAKEN

The following is a list of some of the studies undertaken for this section of State Highway 3 which provide more detailed information for readers:

- *The Road Ahead: Economic Development Study on State Highway 3 North* prepared by NZIER for Venture Taranaki (Sep 2012).
- *SH3 GeoHazards Study Te Kuiti to Mokau* prepared by Transfield Services (Dec 2012)
- *SH3 Hamilton - New Plymouth Corridor Management Plan* (section within Waikato's inter-regional transport study) prepared by Hyder Consulting for Environment Waikato (Dec 2009)
- *Report for SH3 Awakino Gorge Strategic Study* prepared by NZ Transport Agency (2008)
- *SH3 Mount Messenger Investigation - Stage 1 Summary Scheme Assessment Report* prepared by Beca Carter Hollings & Ferner Ltd for Transit NZ (2002)
- *SH3 Hamilton to Mokau Strategy Study* prepared by Payne Royds Consortium (2000)
- *Economic Assessment of the Strategic Value of State Highway 3, between Taranaki and Waikato* prepared by Beca Carter Hollings & Ferner Ltd for the Taranaki Regional Council (1999).
- *SH3 Awakino Slip: Strategy Study Report* prepared by Opus International for Transit New Zealand (1997).
- *The costs of the slip and closure of SH3 at Awakino: 12-19 March 1997* prepared by Taranaki Regional Council (May 1997).
- *SH3 Mokau to New Plymouth Strategy Study* prepared for Transit NZ (1997)
- *SH3 Mokau Bridge Replacement, Economic Assessment* prepared by Bloxham, Burnett and Olliver (1997)

At the time of preparation, the Working Party was contributing to the NZ Transport Agency's *State Highway 3 Hamilton to New Plymouth – Case for future investment* study, which was expected to be released later in 2014.

## PAST AND PRESENT MEMBERS OF THE WORKING PARTY

Representatives on the SH3 Working Party have included:

Taranaki Regional Council	Councillor David Walter (Chair RTC)	2002-2007
	Councillor Barry Marsh	2002-2010
	Councillor Roger Maxwell (Chair RTC)	2008-present
	Rob Phillips (Director Operations)	2008-2011
	Dex Knowles (Director Operations)	2002-2006
	Gray Severinsen (Policy & Strategy Manager)	2002-present
	Mike Nield (Director Corporate Services)	2012-present
	Jo Bielski (Policy Analyst)	2004-2011
	Fiona Ritson (Policy Analyst)	2011-present
Waikato Regional Council	Councillor David Peart	2002-2004
	Councillor Angus MacDonald	2005-2007
	Councillor Andra Neeley	2008-2010
	Councillor Norm Barker (Chair RTC)	2008-2013
	Councillor Russ Rimmington	2011-2013
	Councillor Stuart Kneebone	2011-present
	Councillor Hugh Vercoe (Chair RTC)	2013-present
	Bill McMaster (Programme Manager – Transport Policy)	2002-present
	Isy Kennedy (Senior Policy Advisor)	2007-present
Waitomo District Council	Councillor Ian Whittaker	2002-2004
	Councillor Wendy Chadwick	2002-2004
	Mayor/Councillor Brian Hanna	2005-present
	Councillor Phil Brodie	2011-present
	Andrew Dixon	2002-2004
	Christiaan Van Rooyen	2007-present
	Justin Dempsey	2008-2012
	Gerri Waterkamp	2012-2013
	Johan Rossouw	2014-present
New Plymouth District Council	Councillor Gay Andrews	2002-2004
	Councillor Barry Finch	2002-2007
	Councillor Heather Dodunski	2008-2010 2013-present
	Councillor/Mayor Harry Duynhoven	2011-2013
	Councillor Marie Pearce	2011-2013
	Councillor Shaun Biesiek	2013-present
	Anthony Wilson (General Manager - Community Assets)	2002-2008
	Max Aves (Manager Roading Assets)	2002-present
WC Road Transport Association	Tom Cloke	2002-present
NZ Transport Agency	Ian Cox (Regional Highway Engineer)	2002-2006
	Errol Christiansen (Regional Manager Wanganui)	2002-2006
	Wouter Viljoen (Senior Asset Manager/Contract Manager)	2006-present
	Rob Bullick (Senior Investment Advisor)	2008-2010
	Barry Dowsett (Principal Advisor)	2009-present
	Harry Wilson (Regional Director)	2011-present
	David McGonigal (Highway Manager)	2012-present
	Karen Boyt (Regional Performance Manager)	2012-present
	Delaney Myers (Journey Manager)	2014-present
The New Zealand Automobile Association	John Knuth	2002-2006
	Karyn Stowers	2006-2011
	Fiona Croot	2012-present

NZ Police	Kevin Wellington	2009-2010
	Kris Burberry	2008-present
	Stephen Richardson	2011-present
Transfield Services	Mike Keir	2004-2008
	Richard Parsons	2007-2009
	Cara Fahy	2008-2012
	Campbell Moore	2014-present
Downers	Brian McEldowney	2009-2013



The two tunnels on the route – on Mount Messenger (left) and the Awakino Gorge (right), April 2014



# Terms of Reference for the State Highway 3 Working Group

## Background

For many years the section of State Highway 3 between Taranaki and Waikato has been of considerable concern to both the Taranaki and Waikato communities and road users travelling between the regions.

Heavy rain, floods or severe storm events have resulted in frequent road closures or restricted operation of the highway. In 1997 a washout at Awakino closed the highway for a week. In 1998 massive slumping on Stockman's Hill near Mahoenui resulted in traffic being diverted through an alternative route for four months. Particular sections at risk were Mt Messenger, the Uruti valley and Awakino Gorge. In response to these issues, the State Highway 3 Working Party (Working Group) was established with its first meeting held on 26 August 2002.

Further background information, including a 2014 booklet on the history of the Working Group is available at [www.trc.govt.nz/transport-planning/state-highway-3/](http://www.trc.govt.nz/transport-planning/state-highway-3/).

## Importance of State Highway 3

State Highway 3 (SH3) is of strategic importance to both Taranaki and Waikato, linking the regions with main population centres, markets and import/export facilities to the north and south. The section of SH3 north of New Plymouth connects Taranaki with the Waikato and points beyond, including the key connections to SH39 and the Waikato Expressway. The future route efficiency, safety and reliability of this transport corridor is the priority inter-regional transport issue for the Taranaki region, and is also a significant strategic corridor for the Waikato region.

SH3 is a key route in ensuring agricultural, oil and gas and other products important to the regional and national economy get to processing and manufacturing sites and from there to national and international markets. Not only is it vital to Taranaki's industry and commerce for access to northern markets and export outlets, but also for tourism linkages and access to health, cultural and other services. It has the potential to play a vital role in long-term future development opportunities that could add significantly to New Zealand's economic growth and productivity through initiatives such as an 'east-west corridor' and 'blue highway proposal' linking other parts of New Zealand to Port Taranaki and beyond to markets in Australia and Asia.

SH3 is an alternative route if and when required for state highway traffic, for example being a north/south lifeline for vehicles when the centre of the North Island closes. SH3 also plays an important role during other emergencies, providing access for addressing operational issues such as access to the vital gas pipeline or spillages in the river.

Despite its importance to the Taranaki and Waikato regions the section of SH3 north of New Plymouth has always struggled to gain the funding necessary to make a significant difference to levels of service on the route. Key lifeline issues are involved with this section of SH3 as it has a history of road closures due to its surrounding topography and limited access points. The effect of this situation is that Taranaki is significantly constrained in realising future economic and social goals in part because of the state of this route, which is compounded by the difficult terrain involved and resulting high development costs. While this route is essential for Taranaki's future economic and social well-being and makes a significant contribution to the

regional and national economy, it remains a difficult stretch of road on which there is a need for continuous improvement.

## Purpose

The focus of the Working Group is the section of State Highway 3 between the SH3/3A junction north of New Plymouth (in the New Plymouth District of the Taranaki Region) and Pio Pio (in the Waitomo District of the Waikato Region), and connectors — *refer to the map provided in Figure 1*.

The purpose of the Working Group is to collaboratively promote the strategic importance and resilience of this section of the state highway network by:

1. advocating on matters relating to SH3 to ensure that the strategic and wider benefits of SH3 are considered at regional and national levels
2. providing strategic inter-regional oversight of improvement works
3. providing inter-regional agreement and advice on roading priorities (in order of importance and achievability) and improvements required
4. establishing how to achieve those improvements and to determine an action plan and timeframe.

## Membership

The membership of the State Highway 3 Working Group comprises appropriate representatives from the:

- Taranaki Regional Council
- Waikato Regional Council
- Waitomo District Council
- New Plymouth District Council
- Waka Kotahi New Zealand Transport Agency
- New Zealand Police
- Heavy transport industry
- New Zealand Automobile Association

## Approach

The approach taken by the Working Group is one of inter-regional and inter-agency cooperation and coordination in the pursuit of the objectives set out in this Terms of Reference. For this reason, membership involves representatives from the relevant local government bodies, the accountable road controlling authority (Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency) and key user groups.

Coordination across regional boundaries and agencies in relation to improvements on inter-regional links promotes good outcomes for all parties, makes more efficient use of available resources thereby improving value for money, and aligns well with national strategic priorities.

The Working Group provides a forum for all key decision makers and funders involved with the SH3 roading improvement/maintenance to collaboratively discuss the issues involved with this section of SH3. The Group assists decision-makers through liaising, monitoring, co-ordinating, advocating and collating information on this section of SH3. The emphasis is on customer focus, information sharing, providing input into plans and providing feedback to relevant parties.

## Objectives

In giving effect to the Working Group's purpose, the following specific objectives apply:

1. Advocate for State Highway 3 to be recognised as a strategic inter-regional state highway in regional and national planning and investment processes.
2. Provide a platform for identifying and communicating the wider benefits of the SH3 corridor to inter-regional and national economies now and in the future so that SH3 can play its part in Taranaki, Waikato and New Zealand's economy.
3. Ensure regional and inter-regional transport strategies and plans for SH3 and related networks are aligned and integrated.
4. Advocate for an equitable share of national funds.
5. Provide feedback to Waka Kotahi and their contractors on appropriate levels of service and other road operational/maintenance issues of concern.
6. Expedite upgrading of the route and identify current limitations and route security issues and methods to address them - e.g. more passing lanes, more stock truck effluent disposal sites, corner easing, bridges, tunnel improvements and shape correction.
7. Advocate for reliable and safe alternative routes if available.
8. Improve the publicity and profile of the route to encourage greater tourism numbers through liaising with tourism organisations, the Automobile Association and information centres.
9. Ensure that public communication and consultation on roading matters is appropriate and effective.
10. Ensure that customer needs and interests are communicated in the planning and management of the corridor.

It is noted that while a collaborative and collective approach will be the basis for all Working Group matters, there may be instances where one or more members may need to stand aside for particular decisions made by the wider group in order to not stand contrary to their organisation's adopted policy position.

## Methods

- Studies and investigations to quantify benefits derived from the corridor. Networking opportunities to share information and intelligence around market and land use trends.
- Provide feedback to Waka Kotahi and other road controlling authorities on appropriate levels of service and road operational/maintenance issues of concern. Identify and coordinate opportunities for joint agency initiatives to improve safety, efficiency and effectiveness of the corridor.
- Provide feedback to road controlling authorities on Waka Kotahi decision making processes and outcomes.

## Accountabilities

- Road controlling authorities (including Waka Kotahi) retain decision-making accountability for their networks, planning and funding functions.
- Regional Transport Committees (RTCs) retain all accountabilities for strategy development and programme prioritisation.

## Organisation and procedures

## **Meetings**

- The Working Group is to meet twice a year, where possible, anticipated as being once every six months. Meetings will generally be held at Mōkau.
- The Chair for each meeting will alternate between the Chairs of the Regional Transport Committee (RTC) of Waikato and Taranaki.
- Meetings will be co-ordinated by the Taranaki Regional Council.

## **Servicing**

- Notice of meetings, agenda preparation and meeting notes will be the responsibility of the Taranaki Regional Council, with assistance from member organisation support staff when required.
- An agenda for each Working Group meeting is to be circulated to members prior to the meeting and, where possible, agenda item contributions from members circulated in good time beforehand.

## **Minutes**

- Minutes of each meeting are to be taken. Minutes are to be circulated to meeting attendees within a month of the meeting, and confirmed as accurate at a following meeting.
- The meeting notes may include a list of actions agreed to by participants.
- Meeting notes will be presented to each Regional Transport Committee meeting following for information.

## **Member responsibility**

All members should participate actively and recognise that success depends on a group effort. Members should recognise that the nature and scope of their roles, responsibilities and experience varies, and that each member has a valid contribution to make.

Members of the Working Group are expected to report back to their respective organisations regularly on matters discussed at meetings.

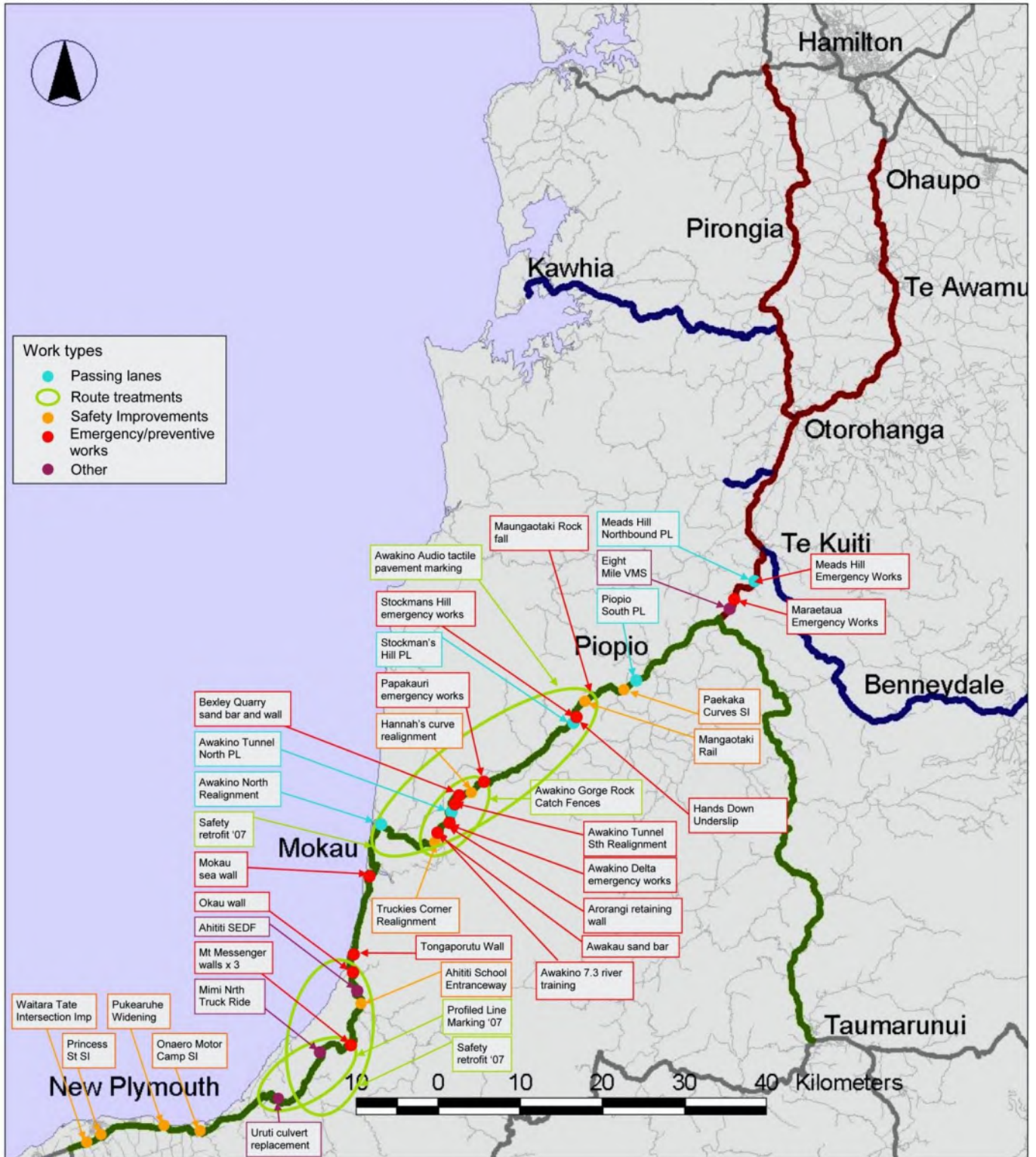
**April 2021**



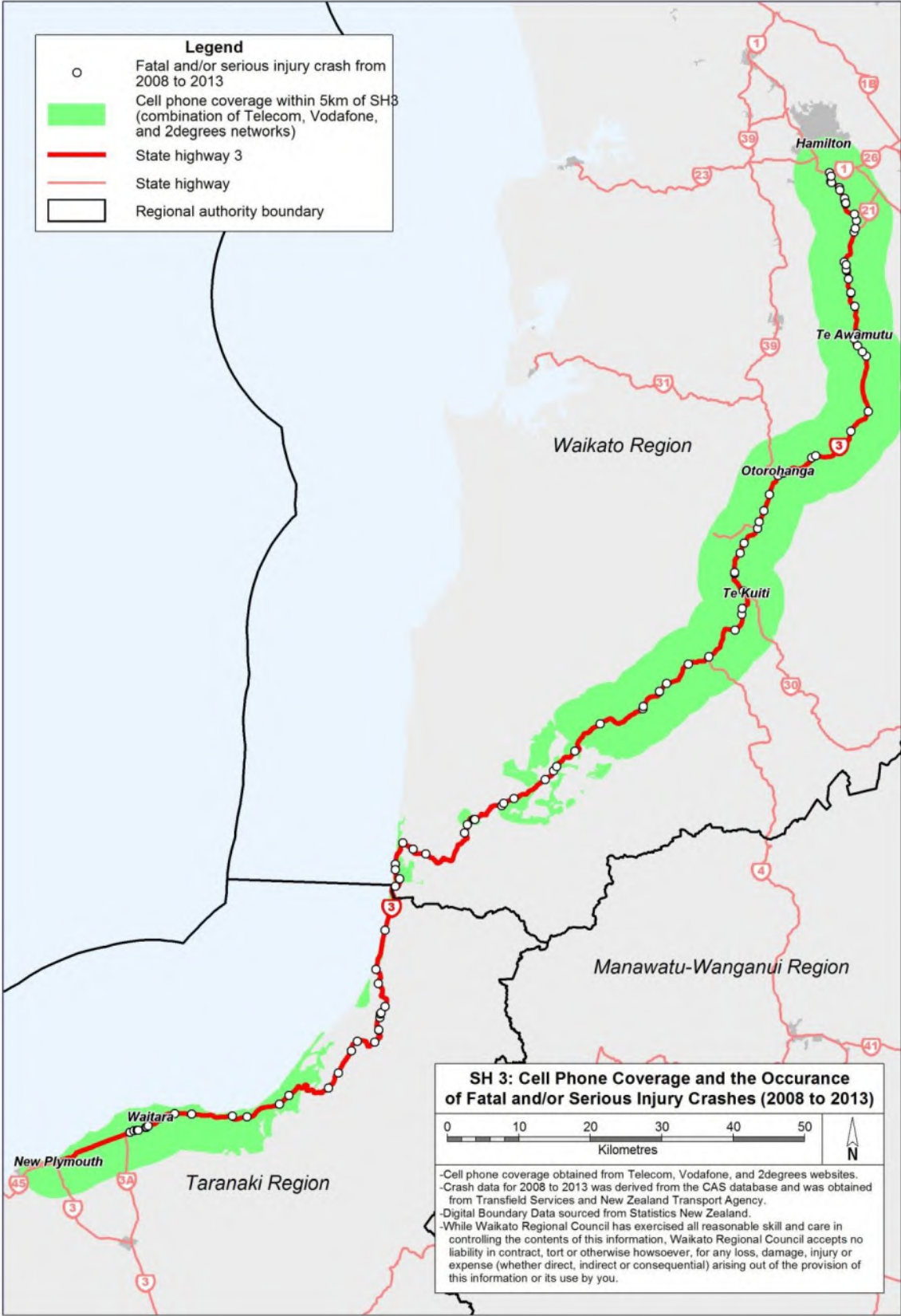
Figure 1: Map showing the section of the SH3 corridor which is the focus of the Working Group, including the political boundaries and general topography

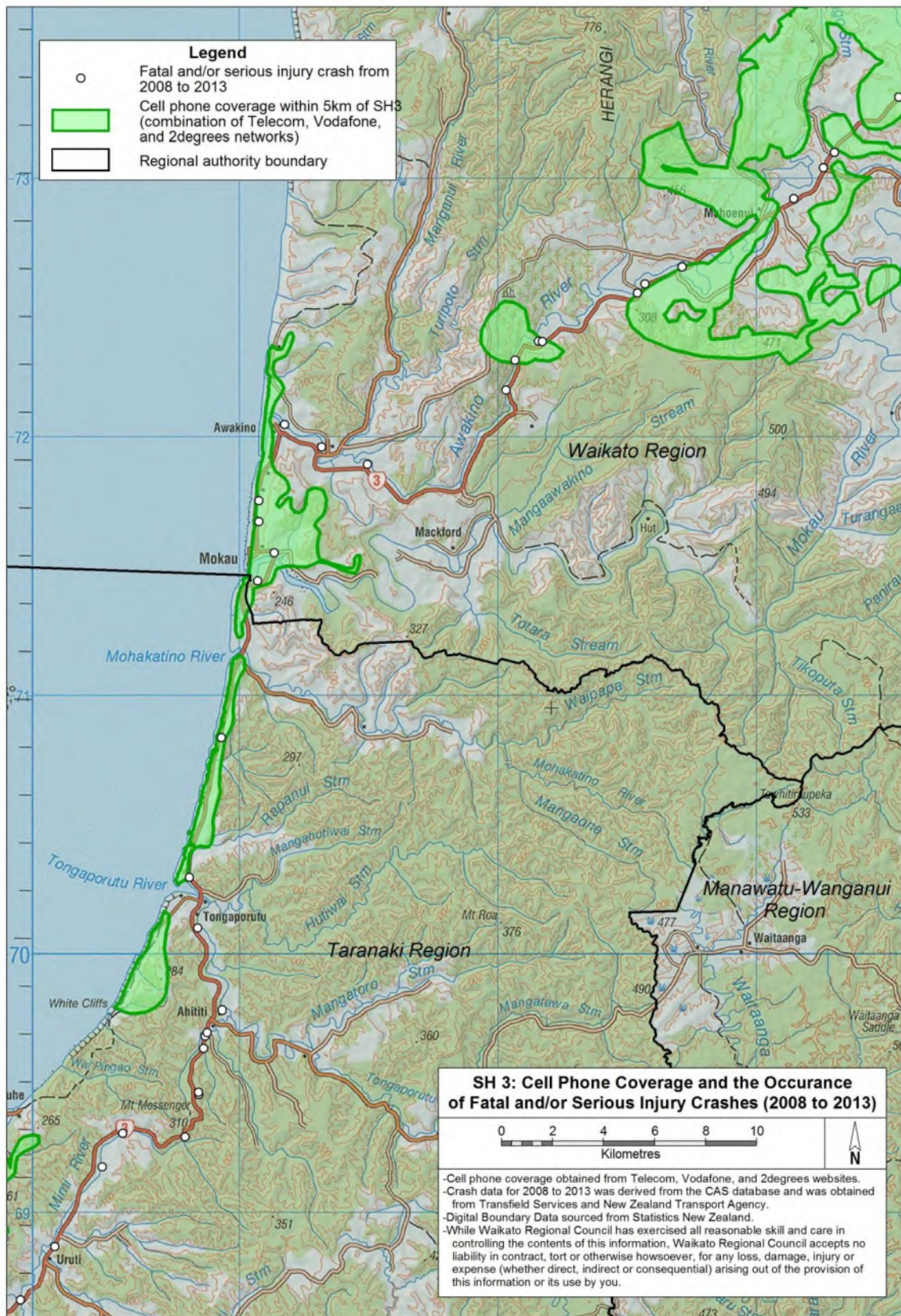
# SH3 Working Party

COMPLETED MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS  
2001-2014



# MAPS – CELL PHONE COVERAGE AND SERIOUS CRASHES

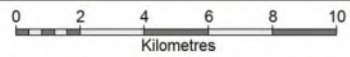




**Legend**

- Fatal and/or serious injury crash from 2008 to 2013
- Cell phone coverage within 5km of SH3 (combination of Telecom, Vodafone, and 2degrees networks)
- ▭ Regional authority boundary

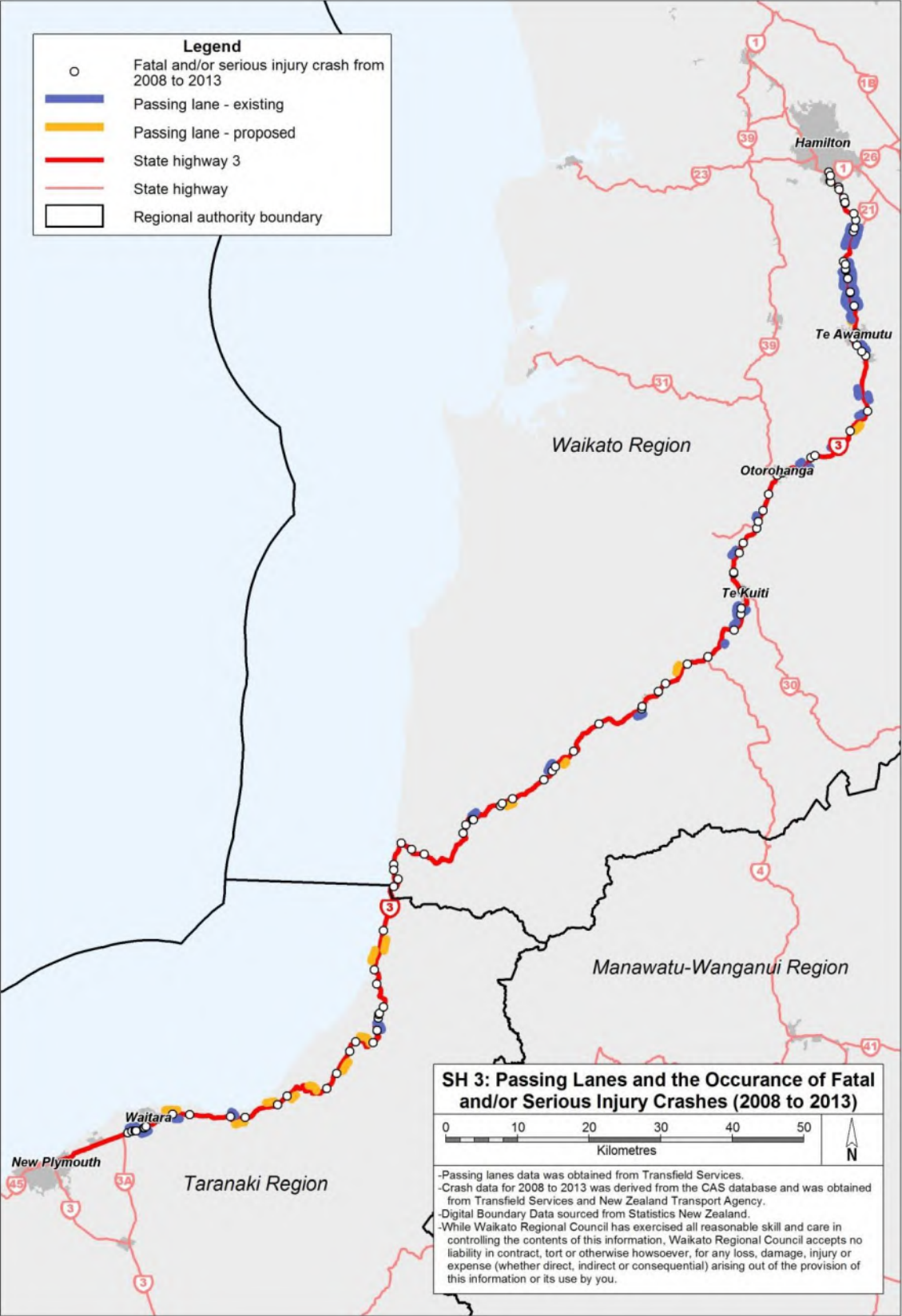
**SH 3: Cell Phone Coverage and the Occurance of Fatal and/or Serious Injury Crashes (2008 to 2013)**

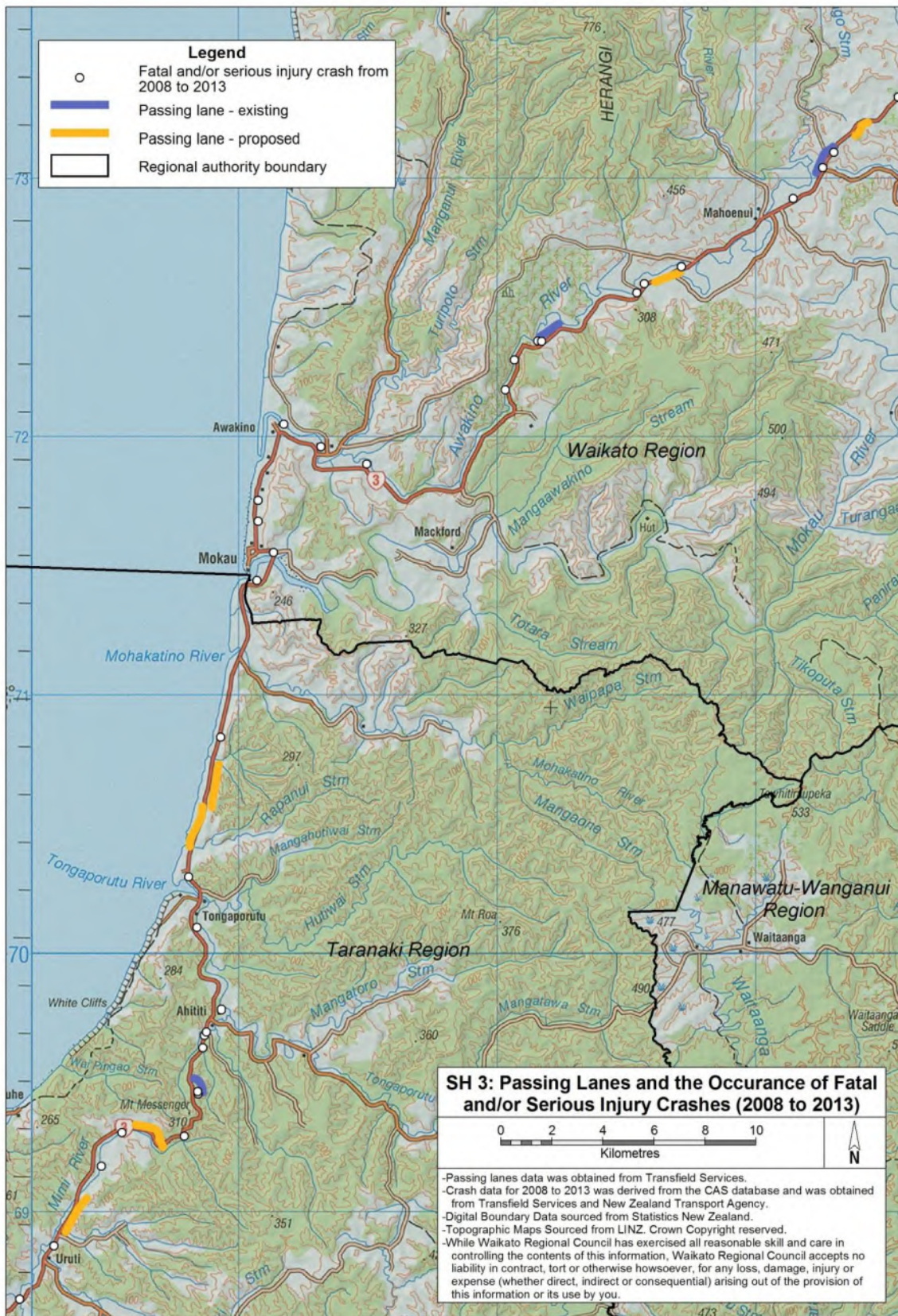


-Cell phone coverage obtained from Telecom, Vodafone, and 2degrees websites.  
 -Crash data for 2008 to 2013 was derived from the CAS database and was obtained from Transfield Services and New Zealand Transport Agency.  
 -Digital Boundary Data sourced from Statistics New Zealand.  
 -While Waikato Regional Council has exercised all reasonable skill and care in controlling the contents of this information, Waikato Regional Council accepts no liability in contract, tort or otherwise howsoever, for any loss, damage, injury or expense (whether direct, indirect or consequential) arising out of the provision of this information or its use by you.



# MAPS – PASSING LANES AND SERIOUS CRASHES





# MAPS – ROAD WORKS AND SERIOUS CRASHES

