

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: NELSON/WEST COAST

Nelson had a wonderful port and was well used by shipping, but it had no other significant means of connecting to the rest of the country as road links were poor or non-existent. It was therefore proposed that a rail link be developed through the Buller Gorge and on to Christchurch to shift coal and other goods from the West Coast for shipping from Nelson, or to take the plentiful agricultural products from Nelson and Tasman districts to markets in the south. This and various other proposals were never realised and the line from Nelson eventually ended more or less in the middle of nowhere, without ever connecting to any other part of the rail network. It is therefore a “section” rather than a branch line.

The West Coast region rail network was built to provide the means for bulk haulage of coal. It also supported gold mining, timber extraction and farm produce. Until the Otira Tunnel pierced the Southern Alps in 1923 these products had to be taken to the few river ports for sending on to markets elsewhere in the country. All the ports were notoriously dangerous, and extraction capacity at the mines and forests had natural limits as a result. Railway lines were initially built to connect various mines to their nearest port, and to some extent with each other. Once the Otira Tunnel was open it became possible to transport goods all the way to Lyttleton and further afield.

The rail network had little option but to run more or less north-south, but the extremities remained separate from each other until the lines from Westport and from Greymouth were connected, and could avail themselves of the services of the Midland Line.

Plans to push rail from the West Coast through the Upper Buller Gorge and on to Nelson never came to fruition, so to this day all rail traffic continues to move from the West Coast through the Otira tunnel in order to reach market.

Unlike many other regions, farming development and land settlement was not a major impetus for rail development on the West Coast.