

Mainstreaming road safety across the Roads and Traffic Authority of New South Wales (RTA)

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Introduction

The New South Wales (NSW) road toll has reduced by 17% from 2003 to 2007 (provisional) compared with an 8% increase for the remainder of Australia and represents a saving of between 200 and 300 lives as well as much larger savings of injury.

The 2007 road toll result has been the fifth consecutive year of road fatality reductions for NSW, only the second time that this has occurred since records began in 1908 (the other period in which there were five consecutive years of fatality reductions was in the period 1989 to 1993). The road toll for 2007 has set many records; the lowest toll in NSW since the Second World War, the lowest number of pedestrian fatalities since records began, and the lowest fatality rate per 100,000 population since records began.

The New South Wales Government has identified road safety as one of its key State Plan priorities. This has presented the RTA with an important opportunity to reduce the State's road toll even further. The RTA's Chief Executive introduced a new focus for the RTA in 2007 to take up the challenges and priorities set by the NSW Government and provide better outcomes for communities across the State. In essence, to continue the downward trend in the road toll, new strategies and organisational processes needed to be devised.

This paper discusses the systematic, internal changes the RTA has made to aspects of its business as well as to its "engineering" activities. The establishment of the NSW Centre for Road Safety is a key step to mainstreaming road safety.

Safe systems approach

RTA has adopted the Safe System approach which promotes the building of a road transport system where fatal and serious injury crashes are not acceptable, recognises that safe travel is a shared responsibility between road users and road system designers/operators, and acknowledges that driver errors should not result in fatal or serious injury. The integrated method also recognises that for the Safe System approach to be successful requires organisation-wide responsibility of road safety or, in other words, mainstreaming of road safety.

NSW Centre for Road Safety

The RTA had to ensure that road safety related capabilities were developed across the spectrum of its business. Therefore, the RTA's actions to improve road safety involved all its directorates and regions. It was essential that strong partnerships were needed to operate between all directorates and that feedback and monitoring mechanisms needed to support the RTA's ability to deliver improved

road safety outcomes were implemented. To achieve this, the NSW Centre for Road Safety was formed.

The NSW Centre for Road Safety is responsible for aligning road safety strategy, determining road safety accountabilities in collaboration with corporate and regional managers, and developing and supporting mechanisms that promote commitment to road safety goals, collaboration, organisational learning and the exchange of information and knowledge at all levels. The Centre for Road Safety was essentially established as the road safety research, policy and technology arm of the RTA with the aim to be the pre-eminent road safety organisation in Australia.

The Centre for Road Safety plays a major role in providing strategic road safety policy advice to government, and is committed to being at the forefront of road safety engineering, technological and behavioural research to advance road safety issues. The main goal of the Centre for Road Safety is to focus its efforts on the initiation, development and provision of high level policy, research, road engineering improvements and behavioural change strategies.

To achieve these goals, the Centre for Road Safety champions road safety as a core RTA value and leads and influences all road safety policy and decision making processes across the RTA. It works collaboratively with the RTA's external partners to change community attitudes. It ensures that the safe system approach is implemented in all RTA business areas. It identifies new opportunities and strategies to influence network management and maintenance decision-making so that road safety benefits can be quantified.

Focus areas for program management

Accurate targeting of investment was required to ensure that the RTA was able to increase the productivity of its investment in road safety improvement to the road network. This required sound information on crash history and risks and considered examination of both the existing road network and projects developed across all RTA programs. To achieve this, the NSW Centre for Road Safety in collaboration with each region undertook region-wide analysis of crash potential and used this to provide input into decisions on project selection for all infrastructure programs.

Road safety performance targets

All RTA regions needed to have specific accountabilities for safety outputs and outcomes. To achieve this, all RTA regions developed specific road safety objectives and targets, agreed to by the RTA's Executive Road Safety Committee.

Road safety impact statements

A process of prioritising projects on a “road safety” basis needed to be established. To achieve this, Road Safety Impact Statements (RSIS) were developed.

The primary purpose of RSIS is to provide project and program managers with a tool to assess the road safety impact of their proposed infrastructure works. A RSIS will produce a set of data that a manager can utilise to: measure forecast crash reductions of prospective works; model alternative works within a project to maximise road safety benefit; and prioritise works according to forecast road safety benefit. This methodology has the ability to focus a larger portion of the RTA infrastructure budget towards improving road safety.

The RSIS approach encompasses a crash index calculation and road safety questionnaire. The application of the principle of RSIS has been varied to suit the relevant program area. For example, the RSIS approach on development projects varied to the RSIS approach on maintenance programs.

In essence, RSIS provides a framework for project managers and program managers to relate their programs to road safety issues. RSIS forecast changes that would be achieved by the proposed program/project on features of the road network such as skid resistance, low radius curves, clear zones in road safety priority areas, and by expected overall outcomes in terms of road safety risk profiles.

Road Safety Impact Statements to date have been prepared and submitted by RTA managers along with their annual program proposals in each of the road maintenance and traffic management programs.

Route reviews

The NSW Centre for Road Safety is also in the process of undertaking a series of road safety oriented corridor studies, similar to road safety reviews undertaken on the Pacific Highway and Princes Highway, for all major rural highways.

This approach has been successfully used on sections of the Pacific and Princes Highways. On the Pacific Highway between Hexham and the Queensland border fatalities dropped from 55 in 2003 to 25 in 2006. Over the same period injuries fell from 617 to 483. On the Princes Highway from Yallah to the Victorian border, fatalities fell from 24 in 2004 to 4 in 2006. Over the same period injuries fell from 324 to 294.

Conclusion

The downward trend in the New South Wales road toll is continuing. The NSW road toll has reduced by 17% for the period from 2003 to 2007 (provisional). This compared with the 8% increase in road toll for the remainder of Australia and represents a significant achievement for the NSW Government, RTA and people of New South Wales.

RTA’s refocus required every facet of its business to take responsibility for road safety and to ensure that road safety related capabilities were developed across the spectrum of its business. To achieve this, numerous initiatives, strategies, and actions were developed and implemented across the organisation.

The mainstreaming of road safety within the RTA is successful due to the backing of the NSW Government and drive from the RTA’s Chief Executive. The establishment of the NSW Centre for Road Safety has a pivotal role in the process.