

A Heavy Vehicle Safety Strategy for Australia: How do we get there and how will it change things?

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Why Do We Need a Heavy Vehicle Safety Strategy?

Heavy vehicle crashes represent a significant proportion of the current level of road trauma. They are involved in crashes in which around 20 percent of fatalities and 10 percent of serious injuries occur. The total cost of heavy vehicle crashes is estimated to be around \$2,300 million a year.

Over the past few years, reductions in heavy vehicle deaths and serious injuries have stabilised, following significant reductions in fatalities and serious injuries during the 1990-1995 period (refer attachment 1). The level of heavy vehicle traffic is expected to increase by 75 percent in the period to 2010. This increase in traffic inherently means greater heavy vehicle exposure and potentially means that the number of crashes could increase substantially unless deliberate action is taken to minimise the additional risks.

Much of the new freight will be carried on a more competitive road transport fleet, and the emergence of intermodal transport operators may see some shift to rail. Even so, road transport will continue to be the dominant carrier in the immediate future for interstate, intrastate non-bulk and urban freight movements. Freight carried by road, vehicle movements and vehicle tonne kilometres will all rise in the first decade of the 21st Century.

The Truck Safety Benchmarking study undertaken for NRTC, compared Australia's heavy vehicle safety record with that of seven other OECD countries. It found that there is significant room for improvement, particularly in relation to night-time crashes, single vehicle crashes and occupant death rates.

Past experience in road safety has shown that concerted national action by major stakeholders can reduce this potential increase in trauma levels as well as assist the industry in meeting its share of the expected 40 percent reduction target in the National Road Safety Strategy. Without a specific strategy and action plan which addresses the needs of the road transport industry, it will be more difficult for the industry to engage its members and associated partners, and for governments to focus on the critical issues which they need to address.

How do we develop a Strategy?

An important backdrop to the Heavy Vehicle Safety Strategy is the recently developed National Road Safety Strategy (NRSS) and the National Road Safety Action Plan. Together, they establish and spell out the broad strategic objectives for the period to 2010 and specific areas of action for the shorter term. Some of these directly relate to road transport, others are more general in nature. A Heavy Vehicle Strategy and Action Plan would complement the existing NRSS, and would focus on the tasks at hand for the heavy vehicle industry, its associated stakeholders and governments.

The NRTC approach to developing a strategy has been to make heavy vehicle safety an issue of its own to distinguish it from broader road safety issues covered by the NRSS. Our experience with the heavy vehicle industry is that stakeholders see themselves as having quite separate safety related issues to other road users. By providing a framework to specifically address these issues, the strategy is more likely to be successful because:

- it can focus specifically on a set of issues identified, recognised and acknowledged by the industry, associated stakeholders, and governments. These issues will be those that are relevant to the road transport industry and not peripheral to its operations;
- it will allow the industry and other stakeholders to play a much more active and comprehensive role in the determination of the strategic objectives and subsequent actions – to a degree not possible if the issues were wrapped up in the NRSS;
- all parties will be more likely to work to reach mutual agreement on objectives, proposed initiatives and targets, because they have a personal stake in the outcomes;
- workable structures can be put in place for all parties to be involved in the short and long term management of the strategy and action plan; and
- the process should lead to a high degree of commitment by the industry, its associated stakeholders, governments and the community as a whole.

Focussing specifically on the safety issues affecting heavy vehicles, does not mean that the strategy will have a narrow focus. Rather it gives the opportunity to provide a range of responses based on sound research. For example, depending on what the research tells us, responses might range from infrastructure initiatives through to programs to influence other road users (which the data indicates are often at fault in heavy vehicle crashes).

The Challenges

The greatest challenge of strategic planning is to engage those parties who are able to define the issues, agree on the solutions and obtain genuine commitment to achieving planned outcomes.

The challenges in developing a Heavy Vehicle Safety Strategy and Action Plan can be listed under three headings:

1. Ensuring constructive consultation. This includes:
 - giving the strategy a profile by holding a launch or similar event to kick-start the development process;
 - ensuring all major players are represented and meaningful exchanges occur throughout the development process; and
 - ensuring all sectors of the industry are adequately represented on working groups or advisory networks.
2. Ensuring ownership of and commitment to the Strategy. This includes:
 - reaching mutual agreement on the causes of serious heavy vehicle accidents;
 - agreeing on the broad strategic objectives, consistent with the National and State Road Safety Strategies and Action Plans;
 - agreeing on strategies and targets;
 - agreeing on an integrated and interactive program to address the issues ; and
 - ensuring commitment to the agreed strategies, action plans and targets to be put to Governments.
3. Ensuring technical or research issues are addressed. For example:
 - effectively utilising the body of research available from the research community;
 - obtaining a better understanding of the major causes of heavy vehicle crashes; and
 - considering the most cost effective means of reducing fatalities and serious injuries involving heavy vehicles.

In order to successfully meet these challenges, the Strategy development process includes some key components that help draw together the need for consultation, commitment by stakeholders and good research. These components include:

- the establishment of a project Task Force to guide the development of the Strategy;
- a seminar in which a range of ideas would be canvassed and broad agreement reached on the core aspects of a Strategy and a range of consequent actions;
- the collation of the outcomes of the seminar by the seminar facilitator and NRTC;
- the consideration of the seminar outcomes, and the development of a draft strategy and action plan by the Task Force representing governments and industry;
- ratification of the draft strategy and action plan by the National Road Safety Strategy Panel, and industry peak bodies;
- approval of the draft documents by the National Road Transport Commission and finally, the Australian Transport Council.

Establishment of a Task Force

A Task Force has been established to undertake two primary tasks. The Task Force will represent governments, industry, the Austroads Road Safety Panel and NRTC.

The first task will be to plan the Seminar, to report on its findings and recommendations, and to prepare a draft Strategy and Action Plan for ATC consideration. It will provide a mechanism for consultation and will liaise with a broad range of stakeholders through a cyber Reference Group.

The Task Force will then oversee the implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan, monitor progress, and be involved in its evaluation. It will report regularly to the National Road Safety Strategy Panel and will maintain contact with the broader range of stakeholders.

The membership of the Task Force is critical to the need for good communication with governments and industry stakeholders, the need for commitment from those involved with heavy vehicles safety and the need to base the Strategy on good research. The membership therefore included individuals representing heavy vehicle operators, state regulators, research agencies and transport workers. The individuals invited to join the groups each have a good knowledge of safety issues, but from very different perspectives. The internal dynamics of the group meetings are such that healthy debate can lead to a consensus view on most issues. This helps reinforce the ownership and commitment to the outcomes needed from the stakeholders.

Heavy Vehicle Road Safety Seminar

The central activity for kick-starting the development process and ultimately reaching consensus on a Heavy Vehicle Road Safety Strategy is a two day seminar to be held in Melbourne on 22-23 October 2002, where high level representation from government, road transport industry bodies, operators, and clients will be able to participate. The success of the seminar is critical to the success of the Strategy. The approach to the Seminar was the subject of considerable discussion by the Task Force. Features of the seminar are:

- It will draw on the best research available. A series of safety monographs in booklet form is to be prepared in advance of the seminar and distributed to members. The Task Force considered which aspects of heavy vehicle safety needed to be concisely explained and which individuals were best placed to translate them into short monographs. The booklets provide not only an important resource for the seminar, but an ongoing resource that captures the essence of all critical heavy vehicle safety issues as documented by Australian experts in their field. Importantly, it allows all seminar participants to become acquainted with all the issues and perspectives prior to the seminar itself.
- It will be by invitation only. The objective is to bring together a group of experts in the field to consider the critical issues and arrive at a set of effective outcomes that can be developed into a Strategy and Action Plan.
- Ray Taylor, General Manager (Business & Marketing) ARRB Transport Research has been appointed with a brief to encourage debate and document key issues that emerge. This will help ensure there is an identifiable outcome from the seminar.
- The Seminar will be structured so that participants can consider and debate a range of position papers prepared and delivered by experts in their fields of statistical analysis, economic forecasting, road safety policy, specific road safety areas and enforcement. The opportunity to debate the papers presented, in light of the monographs will help focus discussion on the key issues needed to progress the Strategy.
- The seminar outputs will be a set of key strategies and actions that can be adopted nationally and provide an excellent chance of success in achieving national and state road safety objectives in relation to heavy vehicle crashes. They are likely to be broadly-based and may address issues that encompass more than just heavy vehicles (eg infrastructure, interaction with other road users, etc)

Finalising the Strategy

The proposals that emerge from the Seminar will be considered by the Task Force, and a draft strategy and action plan will be developed.

It will be put to peak industry bodies and the Australian Transport Council for ratification and commitment.

Conclusion

Australia has adopted a National Road Safety strategy that seeks to reduce road trauma by 40% by 2010. It is important that heavy vehicle owners and operators make a contribution to this reduction. While significant improvements in heavy vehicle fatalities were achieved in the early 1990s, the improvement has plateaued. Recent research benchmarking Australia's heavy vehicle safety performance against its international counterparts indicates that there is significant room for improvement. There is an opportunity to take a strategic approach to achieving improvement and it is important to seize this opportunity particularly given the anticipated growth in the road transport task over the next decade.

It is important that the level of road trauma resulting from crashes involving heavy vehicles be reduced in line with the overall national strategic objectives. This can only be done when all parties have a better understanding of the issues.

A specific Heavy Vehicle Safety Strategy and Action Plan will allow the heavy vehicle industry and the government agencies that regulate it, to focus on those aspects of heavy vehicle operations and the areas of interaction between trucks and other road users, that will provide real and lasting improvements in road safety outcomes.

This strategic approach to heavy vehicle safety has the best chance of ensuring the heavy vehicle element of road trauma makes a significant contribution to the improvement sought by the Australian Transport Council. While the Strategy has a specific focus on heavy vehicles, the outcomes emerging from the Strategy may well have a broader impact, particularly if the research indicates that heavy vehicle safety is best addressed through a broad range of measures.

This project also demonstrates the importance of having well-directed research available to enable sound policy decisions to be made. It is central to the ongoing consideration of heavy vehicle crash reduction planning, that sound statistics and well targeted research continue to be funded at all levels of government.

Attachment 1

Heavy Vehicle Fatalities 1986 – 2001 (Source ATSB)

