

SPEED LIMITS AND ROAD SAFETY IN REGIONAL NSW

Name: Name suppressed

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Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety
NSW Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

The Honourable Lou Amato MLC,

Speed Limits and Road Safety in Regional NSW

I wish to make submissions in regard to the aforementioned subject. As I am employed by a government organisation and acting as an individual, I am unable to provide specific detail regarding my employment and the particulars of my experience due to my employer's strict media policy. However, it is due to my extensive career that I welcome the opportunity to provide this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety, responding to terms (a), (b), (c) and (d) of the inquiry.

a) The Impact of Speed Limits and Travel Times on Driver Behaviour and Safety

Speed limits and driver behaviour significantly impact driver safety on regional roads. Rural and regional residents make up a third of the New South Wales population.¹ However, deaths on country roads make up two thirds of the road toll, this is around 250 deaths per year.² Of these deaths, 60 per cent occur on high-speed roads of 100km/h or more.³ It has long been recognised that high speed collisions are seriously injuring and killing regional and rural drivers, with 70 per cent of fatalities occurring on regional roads. The proposed implementation of increased speed limits, mixed with other factors such as unsafe driver behaviour, speeding, drink and drug driving, driving whilst fatigued and not wearing seatbelts, will ultimately result

¹ Transport for NSW, *2026 Road Safety Action Plan: Toward Zero Trauma on NSW Roads* (Report, April 2022) 16.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid 11.

in a higher number of injuries and deaths on regional roads.⁴ Not only will it increase the number of locals dying on country roads, but it will also increase the trauma experienced by local communities and families.⁵ Similarly, speeding has been long identified as one of the biggest contributing factors to driver fatalities on New South Wales roads, with it being a factor in 47 per cent of deaths in 2020.⁶ Therefore, the implementation of higher speed limits would ultimately be counterintuitive to reducing the number of serious injuries and fatalities already experienced on rural and regional roads.

I am aware in regional New South Wales of the tyranny of distance. The notion of increasing speed limits in order to combat distance and decrease travel times is short-sighted and a lazy suggestion. Increases in speed has little to no effect on travel times as only mere minutes and seconds are being gained. Similarly, it has been identified that traveling a few extra kilometres per hour over the current speed limits increases the time needed to respond to a hazard on the road and raises the impact forces in a crash.⁷ Higher speed limits would therefore increase the overall danger to road users. Ultimately, the implementation of increased speed limits to decrease travel times would be detrimental to regional and rural drivers, resulting in a higher number of injuries and deaths from higher impact speeds. Public safety is not a convenience issue.

b) The Impact of Improved Vehicle Technology and Road Infrastructure

Vehicle safety standards combined with technologies have no doubt made vehicles safer, however the ability of drivers has not. The vast majority of New South Wales drivers have not undertaken any formal training relating to driving and, as such, are not equipped or aware how to safely operate vehicles at higher speeds. An increase in vehicle technology does not improve the ability of the driver. In some cases, the over reliance on vehicle technologies, such as cruise control, can give drivers a false sense of security when it comes to the operations of vehicles. The over reliance on these technologies, in my experience, can lead to drivers not taking proper care and becoming overly reliant on these systems. Similarly, Australians in regional and remote areas often do not have access to these improved vehicle technologies, with the average age of a vehicles in New South Wales currently being 10 years.⁸ The lack of access to

⁴ Ibid 10.

⁵ Ibid 16.

⁶ Ibid 25.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid 22.

technologies, such as lane keep assist and auto emergency braking, further marginalises and disadvantages rural and regional in terms of road safety.⁹

The road network in regional New South Wales is currently not at a standard that could allow drivers to drive at higher speeds safely. Regional roads are poorly maintained and often damaged. Ultimately, driving at the current speed limit can be dangerous in itself due to poor road conditions. This was further identified in the *Aspects of Road Safety in Australia* report which observed that "...rural drivers...often face extra challenges of travelling longer distances at higher average speeds, often on poorer roads."¹⁰ Similarly, the lack of road safety infrastructure in regional New South Wales is most telling about the inadequacies of country roads. Apart from safety railings and road cabling, little has been done to keep the roadways to a suitable standard of safety. The lack of road safety infrastructure on regional and rural areas ultimately fails to protect country drivers from significant hazards that are not experienced by their urban counterparts. Therefore, the state of the road network in regional New South Wales and the lack of infrastructure is currently not at a standard that could allow drivers to drive at higher speed limits safely.

c) The Use of Variable Speed Limits

Variable Speed Limits are often confusing and are of little use in regional New South Wales roads. Speed limits need to be kept simple and limited, so drivers, no matter what their locality, even in the absence of signage can better gauge prevailing speed limits.

d) Any Other Related Matters

Governments have allowed the access of longer, slower, and heavy vehicles into areas not normally accessible to such vehicles. There are also regular harvest activities that see farm vehicles and equipment regularly utilising our roadways. The consequences of this access increases risky driver behaviour, such as excessive speeds and dangerous overtaking. The lack of foresight in this area is both bewildering and disappointing. An example of this is on the Kamilaroi Highway, Baan Baa to Narrabri and the Oxley Highway, Gunnedah to Tamworth. A frustrated driver is a dangerous driver. Therefore, the lack of overtaking lanes to ensure the free and open flow of traffic is a major problem that needs to be addressed rather than the implementation of higher speed limits.

⁹ *Aspects of Road Safety in Australia* (Interim Report, May 2016) 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 41.

Similarly, the propensity to encounter or strike domestic, native, and feral animals on regional and rural roads is high. There is also a greater risk of impacting objects that are closely adjacent to roadways. Furthermore, vehicles driven at speed experience many different variations. These include a decrease in stability, a decrease in re-action time, higher impact speeds, higher chance of mechanical failure, greater injuries from sudden deceleration collisions and an increase in breaking distance:

Example 1: A car travelling at 100kph travels at 27 metres per second. Stopping Distance 40 metres.

Example 2: A car travelling at 120kph travels at 33 metres per second. Stopping Distance 55 metres.

Regional New South Wales drivers are already overrepresented in serious and fatal motor vehicle collisions. The term locals dying on local roads is often used. Therefore, implementation of higher speed limits in conjunction with the variables above, would only serve to increase the number of injuries and deaths on regional roads.

Conclusion

For the past 30 years, I've seen firsthand the devastation of road crashes. My experience has not been gained from looking at data, looking at dots on maps or by reading books. It has been from investigating, pulling mangled bodies from car wrecks, and dealing with families who have lost loved ones.

It is therefore my view that by increasing the speed limits on regional roads, it will only serve to increase the death and misery we already see on our roads, ultimately making the message that has been touted by governments for years redundant, that **SPEED KILLS**.

Yours sincerely,

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