

SPEED LIMITS AND ROAD SAFETY IN REGIONAL NSW

Organisation: Snowy Valleys Council

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Snowy Valleys Council

Response

to the

Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety

(Staysafe)

Inquiry into and report on

Speed Limits and Road Safety

in regional New South Wales,

with reference to:

- a) The impact of speed limits and travel times on driver behaviour and safety
- b) The impact of improved vehicle technology and road infrastructure
- c) The use of variable speed limits
- d) Any other related matters.

Introduction

Road crash data for the Snowy Valleys Council reports that speeding is a significant cause of crashes at a rate almost three times compared to the whole of NSW.

Excessive speed is a causative factor in 47% of road crashes compared to the whole of NSW where speed is a factor in 17.3% of crashes. Complaints from ratepayers about motorists speeding along country roads are common. Therefore, Snowy Valleys Councils welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety (Staysafe) inquiry on speed limits and road safety in regional NSW.

Council Road Network Information.

The Snowy Valleys is situated in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, approximately 350 kilometres southwest of Sydney, covers an area over 8960 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 14349 residents (2021 census). The key industries of the area are forestry and associated industries, traditional agriculture, horticulture, retail, government services and tourism.

The council's road network include the Transport for NSW managed Snowy Mountains Highway plus numerous other main roads. The Snowy Valleys Council manages 1026 km of the roads. The managers and owners of the roads within the local government areas include the Transport for NSW, NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, Snowy Valleys Council, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Corporation of NSW, Snowy Hydro Limited and private road owners including Visy Australia.

The road network comprises of state managed roads including the state highway MR4 Snowy Mountains Highway, main roads including MR 85 Jingellic-Gilmore Road, MR677 Alpine Way and MR279 Gocup Road, and local roads including Old Tumbarumba Road, Bombowlee Creek Road and Brungle Road. These roads link the main centres of Tumut, Tumbarumba, Batlow and Adelong as well as the villages of Khancoban, Brungle, Talbingo, Rosewood, and Jingellic. The road network is mostly 100km/hr with only the Transport for NSW managed Snowy Mountains Highway and the Alpine Way having portions with lower speed zones suitable for the mountainous

terrain that the roads traverse. The council's town and villages are 50 km/hr zone though Rosewood has a speed limit of 60 km/hr through the centre of the village and only three centres, Tumbarumba, Adelong and Batlow, have 40 km/hr High Pedestrian Access Areas in the central business districts. There are 80 km/hr speed zones on some, but not all approaches to Batlow, Adelong, Talbingo, Tumut and Tumbarumba and an 80 km/hr zone through the locality of Laurel Hill.

The council covers a large geographical area with distances between the centres including

- Tumbarumba and Tumut 66 km and takes 55 minutes of driving at speed limits and advisory speed,
- Tumut and Batlow 33 km but takes 30 minutes,
- Tumut and Adelong 21 km and takes 20 minutes of driving,
- Tumut and Talbingo 42 km and only 35 minutes, and
- Tumbarumba and Khancoban 76 km and 54 minutes.

These times as indicated are for travelling at a speed of 98 km/hr (to allow for a speed cushion to avoid being apprehended by mobile speed cameras) and adjusting speeds for advisory speeds for curves but travel times can be longer due to wildlife, weather conditions, and slow moving heavy vehicles.

Driving at 92 km/hr rather than 98 km/hr between Tumbarumba and Tumut has been found to only add 150 seconds to the journey time, however dropping the travelling speed to 80 km/hr adds a noticeable (but to date unmeasured) time period.

Crash History 2016 to 2021

There were 135 crashes whose cause was contributed to by speeding in the Snowy Valleys Council from 2016 to 2021. According to road crash data released by the Centre for Road Safety, crashes in the Snowy Valleys Council that are attributed to speeding are often

- single vehicle crashes (128 out of 135 or 95% of crashes caused by speeding)
- off road on curves (123 out of 135 or 91% of crashes caused by speeding)

- distributed between
 - local roads (48 out of 135 or 36% of crashes caused by speeding)
 - regional roads (24 out of 135 or 18% of crashes caused by speeding)
 - state roads (53 out of 135 or 46% of crashes caused by speeding)
- on 100km/hr roads (89 out of 135 or 66% of crashes caused by speeding)
- during dry conditions (85 out of 135 or 63% of crashes caused by speeding) noting that 8 crashes were in snow or ice.
- Occur during daylight hours (98 out of 135 or 73% of crashes caused by speeding)

These statistics show that crashes that are caused by speeding often occur during optimal driving conditions.

Speed and Traffic Detection

Council determines that proportion of traffic that is speeding by using traffic counters such as Metrocount TM Traffic Counters (the two parallel rubber tubes across the road) and radar fitted to the trailer mounted message boards. The results indicate that speeding, particularly high range speeding, is more likely to occur on local roads. For example, the Tooma Road is a regional road (MR628) that has two opposing traffic lanes with edge lines and centre lines but no sealed shoulders. At one site at a location known as Clarkes Hill the traffic counter determined that 16.9% (32,432 out of 191,909) were exceeding the 100 km/hr speed limit and 0.4% exceeding 120 km/hr. This can be compared to Bombowlee Creek Road (near Lowthers Lane) that is a local road linking the forestry plantations with the Tumut sawmills. This road also has two opposing lanes with edge lines and centre lines. Speeds detected along this local road (and measured over three weeks) detected that 57% (3164/5509 detections) of traffic exceeded 100 km/hr and 1.7% (94 out of 5509) of traffic exceeds 120 km/hr. Similar results indicate that speeding is common on Goobragandra Road and on Old Tumbarumba Road; the Goobragandra Road that has a narrow pavement (less than 8 metres wide) with no centre or edges lines , having no shoulders and is twisty and lined by gum trees was determined to have an average mean speed of traffic along is 74 km/hr, noting that the average speed included a maximum reading of 125km/hr.

Possible reasons for higher rates of detection on Local Roads are low volumes of traffic and the perceived low risk of being detected by Highway Patrol or by mobile speed cameras.

Speed and Residents

Such speeds along local roads are noticed by resident ratepayers who voice their concerns to council and sometimes make requests for lowered speed limits that would match the condition of the roads. The roads with the most complaints, including Old Tumbarumba Road, Ardrossan Road, Goobragandra Road, Yellowin Road, Grahamstown Road, Brungle Road and Bombowlee Creek Road; these roads are typically single lane pavement with no centre line nor edge lines with narrow or non-existent road shoulders and the roads are usually sealed yet still are signposted to have a speed limit of 100 km/hr. Council's response to these concerns is to measure the traffic speeds using traffic counters and have often found that the complaint is substantiated with traffic speed readings well above the 100 km/hr speed limit. These concerns are relayed to Transport for NSW for review and the responses have been disappointing and instructing council to maintain the 100 km/hr speed zones and, at times, to install signage that remind road users to drive at speeds suitable for the conditions.

Driving at speeds suitable for the conditions is an ambiguous message open to interpretation of the drivers who are influenced by their experience of driving, exposure to road trauma, familiarity of the road environment and time pressures of life.

Managing Speed

Speeding on regional roads is more likely to be successfully managed using remedies such as infrastructure upgrades, decreasing the speeds in zones and greater enforcement through NSW Police Highway Patrol and the Transport for NSW Mobile Speed Cameras.

Managing Speed through Improvements to Infrastructure

The impact of improvements to road infrastructure in reducing speed related trauma can be observed on Gocup Road (Main Road Number 279). Transport for NSW (then RMS) committed \$70 million to upgrading the 31km from Tumut to Gundagai and completed the road upgrade project in June 2019 after five years of work. The project included such road safety improvements determined to have an effect on reducing speed related crashes include widening and sealing shoulders of the road, increasing the radius of curves, improving superelevation of the road, and installing audio tactile lines. Road trauma over three years decreased from the pre-project 2011 to 2013 period with 25 crashes resulting in 12 casualties where 44% of crashes had speeding as a factor. In the post-project three-year period there were 5 crashes resulting in 3 casualties where speeding was a causative factor of 3 crashes (60%). The improvements along the MR279 Gocup Road to improve road safety have decreased the incidence of road trauma to 1 fifth of the pre-project levels.

This successful intervention and the availability of road safety funding has prompted council to seek grants for road safety infrastructure upgrades. The application process for road safety grants is challenging and time consuming to attempt. Council has applied for seven grants in the last two years with 6 being endorsed for consideration by the funding bodies and, as of June 30th 2022, only two speed related road safety treatments have being funded and completed. All four of the other endorsed projects are in 100 km/hr zones and have been the sites of crashes that were caused by speeding. These submissions have cost the council almost \$100000 (one hundred thousand dollars) in preparation with outlays for road safety audits, concept drawings and consultants fees plus salaries for office staff. These road safety infrastructure projects are waiting for funding to be available before construction. If these projects are not funded then this outlay is wasted with an associated unfortunate loss of motivation to attempt for future safer road funding opportunities.

Road Safety infrastructure upgrades are expensive and an economical method to reduce speed related road trauma is to reduce speed limits.

Managing Speeds through Reductions in Speed Zones

Reduction in speed zones has been attempted in four locations in Snowy Valleys Council; these road segments include the Alpine Way south of Khancoban, and on the Snowy Mountains Highway at Talbingo Mountain, Adelong Gap and between Tumut and the Batlow Road intersection.

The MR677 Alpine Way was treated in 2020 when an extra 25.7km of 60km/hr speed zone was reduced from 80 km/hr to reduce the speed related road trauma. The history behind that decision includes a crash period from 2011 to 2013 where there were 66 crashes resulting in 44 casualties. 33 (50%) of these crashes had a speeding as a causative factor. Seven (10.5%) crashes occurred in 60 km or less zones, thirty-four (51.5%) in 80 km/hr zones and twenty-five (38%) in 100 km/hr zones.

In the three years, 2019 to 2021, there were 31 crashes along the Alpine Way (within Snowy Valleys Council boundaries) with nineteen of these (61%) caused by speeding. Eight (26%) of the crashes occurred in 60 km/hr zones, fourteen (45%) in 80 km/hr zones and nine (29%) in 100km/hr zones. A plausible rationale for the increase in proportion in crashes caused by speeding is the rollout of the 60 km/hr zones where motorists are tempted to exceed the speed limit and therefore the cause of the crash to be identified as speeding. The reduction in crashes in 100km/hr zones could be explained by the significant rezoning of long stretches of mountainous roads from 100km/hr to 60 and 80 km/hr as well as reducing 80 km/hr zones to 60 km/hr.

Council and local road managers have nominated several local roads, including Yellowin Road and Green Hills Access Road for lower speed zones at the behest of residents and industry, these requests have unfortunately been refused with the road managers been instructed to maintain the current 100 km/hr speed zones.

Managing Speeds through Enforcement

Speed enforcement is the responsibility of NSW Police, particularly the Highway Patrol, and Transport for NSW's managed mobile speed camera program. The NSW

Police Highway Patrol operates mainly on the main roads and highways where traffic flow is highest but also patrol specific sites when requested with due cause. There is a level of co-operation between Snowy Valleys Council and the NSW Police Highway Patrol with information frequently being passed between the two organisations and regular conversations for example at the Local Traffic Committees as well as the Emergency Management Meetings.

The Transport for NSW managed mobile speed camera program are often positioned on the main roads at sites where speeding is likely to occur. There is little opportunity for council to interact with the mobile speed camera program and it is notable that councillors have requested the mobile speed cameras to focus on sites with known crash histories.

Vehicle Technology

The decrease in speed related road trauma could be partially attributed to vehicle technology including cruise control, intelligent cruise control and lane assist technology. These road safety features are mandatory in the Snowy Valleys Council's vehicle fleet.

The functional effectiveness of this road safety technology is limited on roads that do not have centre and edge lines such as Old Tumbarumba Road, Elliot Way and the Goobragandra Road. An example is Intelligent Cruise Control requires visible road lines to calculate adjustments in speeds and this feature is redundant on the above roads.

The heavy vehicle industry routinely uses telemetry and dash cameras to monitor their business fleet's speed and road behaviour. The dash cam footage from heavy vehicle operators has been provided to council and NSW Police when there have been alarming speed related incidents. Incidence of speeding by individual heavy vehicles are reported to the business owners who have dealt with the driver concerned.

Variable Speed Zones

There are no variable speed zones in the Snowy Valleys Council.

Conclusion

The impact of adjustments to speed limits and the improvements to road safety infrastructure have appeared to have assisted in lower the speed related road trauma in Snowy Valleys Council. There should be significant improvements in speed behaviour if Snowy Valleys Council could effectively nominate local roads to have lower speed limits and access the necessary funds to provide safer road infrastructure.

Thank you to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety (Staysafe) for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.

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