

**Submission  
No 60**

## **SPEED LIMITS AND ROAD SAFETY IN REGIONAL NSW**

**Organisation:** Mid-Western Regional Council

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SUBMISSION TO  
PARLIAMENTARY  
COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO SPEED LIMITS  
AND ROAD SAFETY IN  
REGIONAL NSW

Joint Standing Committee  
on Road Safety  
(Staysafe)

5 JULY 2022

MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL  
MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL  
OPERATIONS

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Samantha Cecchini works as a Road Safety Officer with Mid-Western Regional Council and closely liaises with Transport for NSW and Orana District Police (Mudgee Highway Patrol) to understand the driving behaviour of residents and visitors to the Mid-Western Region.

She worked at Brisbane City Council in Queensland for a decade prior to moving to Mudgee in 2019 providing a rich and dynamic understanding of metro V regional travel, commuting, and access to public transport.

## About the Mid-Western Region

The Mid-Western Region covers 8,752km<sup>2</sup> and is located in the Central Ranges of New South Wales, approximately 210km northwest of Sydney, 250km west of Newcastle, and 300km north of Canberra.

The main town in the Mid-Western Region is Mudgee, located approximately 100km north of Bathurst and 100km southeast of Dubbo.

According to the 2021 census, the Mid-Western region has 25,713 residents, 12,563 of whom are living in Mudgee.

Major industries in the region are tourism, mining, retail, agriculture, and construction.

The Mid-Western Region has a culture of car dependence, mostly due to the lack of public transport and long commutes to other regional centres and places of industry.

The extensive road network is 2,448km in length including 1,254km of unsealed rural local roads, 494km of sealed rural local roads, 326km of sealed rural regional roads, 182km of urban local roads, and 192km of National Highway/State Road.

Quite famously, the Mid-Western Region has no traffic lights.

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN PREPARED BY SAMANTHA CECCHINI, ROAD SAFETY OFFICER FOR MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL. COVER IMAGE SHOWS PUTTA BUCCA ROAD, MUDGEE.

ANY QUESTIONS IN RELATION TO THE CONTENT OF THIS DOCUMENT SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO:  
[REDACTED] OR (02) 6378 2850

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## Notes for speed limits in regional areas

Below is a summary of Samantha's observations that may be of interest to the Committee.

### The impact of speed limits and travel times on driver behaviour and safety

In our community in the Mid-Western Region (Mudgee), we generally have the following speed limits:

- 50 km/h in townships
  - 100km/h outside of townships
  - 40km/h in active school zones, in High Pedestrian Activity Areas (Mudgee towncentre), road works
  - 80km/h in transitional zones between townships and open road
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- The expression 'driving to the conditions' is in the common vernacular. With such a vast road network (2,448km), and limited resources to maintain the road pavement, it is vulnerable to weather (flooding, black ice etc), exposure and environmental conditions. All of our roads are single-lanes. None have traffic lights.
  - Sudden (and significant) potholes, washed out gravel roads, and fallen debris, would be amongst the most common road complaints from residents. 'Hooning' in residential areas is also common.
  - We believe the current speed limits in our regional area are suitable. 100km/h on our highways (Castlereagh Highway) and regional roads (such as Wollar Road, and Ulan Road) is the maximum we would recommend. In places, a lower speed limit has merit. These roads have curves, variations in level and width, dense roadside vegetation, and restricted lines of sight. The risk of animal strikes is constant, and the road surfaces is vulnerable to damage by extreme weather, fallen debris, heavy vehicle use etc.
  - With the availability of Google Maps and recommended travel routes, it is possible to plan journey times with a good-deal of accuracy. However, these routes don't account for road condition or road type. Local knowledge is still required when selecting the more appropriate route.
  - Local drivers are generally comfortable with driving 2+ hours on a regular basis (to access health care, retail, professional services).
  - Vehicle types vary greatly. 4WD and utility vehicles are common, as are light trucks, heavy vehicles, and caravans and towed vehicles. Visitors to the region can travel in sports cars.
  - Due to limited pedestrian and cycling paths in the region, both urban and regional cyclists (including school children) are sharing the road with vehicles. The design of active travel infrastructure is difficult given the resources of the Council and the variation of desired travel routes.
  - With 1,254km of gravel (unsealed) roads, variable road conditions, and a broad range of landscapes and road user groups, setting speed limits is not a simple task. Everyone has an opinion.
  - With extremely limited public transport options outside of the main township areas, our regional workforce as a significant reliance on private vehicle use. Even though every shiftworker, farmer and traveller would appreciate a shorter commute time to their destinations, the local terrain is not conducive to higher speed limits.

- As both a coal mining and a food and wine region, a large portion of our regular road user groups are shiftworkers. Fatigue and night travel is an issue.
- Visiting motorists (tourists) are also an issue. Many are not comfortable with 'country' driving, particularly relating to fatigue, overtaking, parking and night travel.
- Needing to slow down significantly due to road/weather conditions is no doubt frustrating and has the potential to impact on arrival times to work/school/training, but it is part of life in a regional community. Keeping to a tight schedule is a contributor to risky driving behaviours. There are often no 'short-cuts' to get ahead of traffic. In the absence of street lighting in most areas, safe driving conditions are also subject to daylight.
- Sharing the road with heavy vehicles and caravans can negatively impact driver behaviour too. These vehicles often travel slower than the posted speed limit and impede line of sight. There are limited sections of road where overtaking can be executed safely.
- Sharing the road with P-platers is also a challenge. Their restricted licence limits their speed limit to 90km/h which can make them a hazard in a single-lane 100km/h zone.
- There will always be a percentage of drivers with a poor attitude to speeding and will frequently exceed the posted speed limit. This is exacerbated on regional roads where drivers are not expecting to be caught.
- We would recommend increasing the provision of more overtaking lanes and off-road rest areas on our highways and main travel routes, especially with the spike in caravan traffic.
- We would also recommend improved methods of reporting road damage so it can be repaired promptly by Council.

### The impact of improved vehicle technology and road infrastructure

- Most regional drivers would have access to some form of cruise control in their vehicles, but lane assist, fatigue tracking, and other vehicle technologies are still emerging in a regional marketplace.
- The suitability of these improved vehicle technologies is debatable on regional roads.
  - Not all roads are painted with centrelines or 'fog lines'.
  - Greater resourcing is needed to maintain fog lines as they play an important role in delineating the road, especially in night conditions. The lines can fade with exposure, or be damaged with heavy vehicle use or overgrown vegetation. They also require specialist machinery to install.
  - Drivers may need to leave their lane to avoid a hazard (significant road damage/pothole, fallen debris, struck animal etc), and any unnecessary warning provided by lane assist technology is quickly conditioned to be ignored.
  - Same for fatigue tracking. Fatigue is a very personal response and can take effect after 20 minutes or several hours.
- New vehicle purchases are limited to the stock held by local traders. There might be merit in offering subsidies for safer vehicles.

## The use of variable speed limits

- Variable speed limits are not available in the Mid-Western region, except during road works or major events in the community.

## Any other related matters

- Motorcycle crashes are highly represented in our regional crash statistics (19% of the total number of crashes in 2016-2020 period). Road condition, rider experience, fatigue and access to help when things go wrong is believed to be contributing factors.
- Heavy vehicle drivers are the cornerstone of any regional road network and yet suitable rest and refreshment facilities require improvement and consideration.
- Mobile phone coverage is inconsistent in our region. Accessing help when go wrong (due to crash, animal strike, breakdown etc) can be challenging. Also identifying a location when landmarks are non-distinguishing can delay emergency response.