

**Submission
No 24**

**INQUIRY INTO PRESSURES ON HEAVY VEHICLE
DRIVERS AND THEIR IMPACT IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Road Freight NSW

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**Submission to Portfolio Committee No. 6 - Transport and the Arts,
NSW Legislative Council**

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New South Wales**

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MESSAGE FROM RFNSW

Ms Cate Faehrmann, MLC
Committee Chair, Portfolio Committee No. 6 – Transport and the Arts
NSW Legislative Council
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Chair

I welcome the opportunity to provide this written Submission on behalf of Road Freight NSW (RFNSW), the State's peak road transport industry organisation.

By way of background, RFNSW began as the NSW Road Transport Association (RTA) in 1893. The organisation has developed to become a respected advocate for the State's trucking operators, as a conduit to government, regulators and enforcement agencies.

In 2015, we adopted the name Road Freight NSW, which best articulates our independent and authoritative viewpoint thanks to our respected executive leadership and the passion and expertise of members contributing to the Policy Council.

We are, *'The voice of the road transport industry in NSW.'*

Our members range from some of Australia's largest heavy vehicle transport operators, including BlueScope, DHL and Toll, through to smaller, family business operators like Vellex, Border Express and Hannah's Haulage, representing thousands of employees across NSW.

This Submission from RFNSW responds to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference that are directly relevant to NSW trucking operators.

We look forward to the Inquiry examining the daily operational and regulatory pressures our RFNSW members are facing during these tough economic times and the significant impacts they are having on the State's road network.

I look forward to appearing before the Committee and will be available to provide any further information you may need, as part of your all-important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Simon O'Hara
Chief Executive Officer
Road Freight NSW.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HEAVY VEHICLE INDUSTRY AND VARIOUS PRESSURES THAT SHAPE DRIVER PRACTICE

As inflation rises and the cost-of-living crisis heightens, RFNSW members, many of them small family business owners, are struggling to make ends meet.

In the wake of the pandemic, chronic driver shortages, crippling increases in fuel costs, tolls and port access levies, the damage to roads caused by natural disasters, compromised supply chains and heavy-handed penalties for even minor administrative errors, have all combined to place enormous physical, mental and emotional pressures on truck operators and their ability to do their job safely and effectively.

For example, the penalties for log-book errors can have a significant impact on driver well-being, when the errors are administrative and have no real bearing on road safety.

As one RFNSW member remarked, 'Very few workers stand to lose a week's wages for a typo, the wrong colour pen being used, or a crooked line ... yet drivers are at risk of this every time they fill-in their log-book'.

These punitive penalties can be issued days, weeks, or even months after a minor error has occurred. RFNSW and our members believe penalties should truly reflect the nature of the error.

It must not be forgotten that our truck operators supported the State throughout the pandemic. But it now appears as if they've become 'low hanging fruit', used and valued in times of need - then discarded and punished when their services are not so urgently required.

RFNSW would argue that legislated requirements put forward for the safe conduct of our industry, must be supported by Government in terms of better roads, infrastructure and facilities that ensures the legislation can be adhered to.

One RFNSW member from Dubbo recently had drivers sitting on either side of the Blue Mountains for over 8 hours because of an accident on a single lane highway – the 'debacle of the Great Western Highway'. According to the operator, 'the disruption in productivity to Central Western NSW is still being felt four days after the affect and yet a closed lane in greater Sydney is called a catastrophe!'

Drivers and operators are, for the most part, trying to do the right thing, but struggle to see that effort met with the same level of support from the various levels of Government that we work with on a daily basis.

Given that freight task in NSW will only continue to grow in years to come, Government investment and the roll-out of economic and regulatory reforms are urgently-needed, to ensure our industry remains viable now and into the future.

OVER-HEIGHT TRUCKS + PENALTIES FOR OVER-HEIGHT VEHICLE INCIDENTS

RFNSW certainly agrees that there's been too many instances of over-height trucks obstructing traffic across the NSW road network, particularly on the approach to the Sydney Harbour Tunnel.

Yet, it is not always the driver who is at fault. Drivers have been pulled-up approaching tunnels, even though they were within height limits, with pot-holes causing the truck to set-off over-height sensors. In other cases, sensors have been set-off by small pieces of plastic/aluminium protruding from the top of trucks.

Current shortages of experienced drivers are only adding to the issues transport operators are experiencing running their business.

Contract drivers can be unfamiliar with the height of the truck and/or trailer they are hauling and new drivers, or those from interstate or from outside of Sydney, aren't aware of differing height limits on local tunnel roads. Appropriate signage at appropriate locations has also been cause for concern for truckies making some of these journeys.

Whilst regular drivers know the height of their rigid trailers, others driving flatbeds don't always know the height of containers they're loading on to flatbeds.

RFNSW believes there is a need to strengthen education programs aimed at encouraging heavy vehicle drivers to check their height load limits and be aware of height restrictions on tunnel roads.

In addition, height-monitoring cameras and associated technology currently being used to monitor trucks approaching the Sydney Harbour Tunnel and other height-restricted infrastructure, should be enhanced for preventative measures, in order to trigger warnings for drivers on feeder roads - well-before the truck enters the tunnel or height-restricted infrastructure. Additional signage would supplement this initiative.

We have argued that as an industry, we need to work with Government to develop and implement sensible, practical solutions which won't see trucks taken-off the road for up to six-months, hurting trucking businesses and the wider NSW economy.

RFNSW has played an active role in the Government's Over-Height Vehicle Workshops and Taskforce and we are currently engaging with Transport for NSW so they can understand current practices used to comply with tunnel height restrictions on the Sydney road network. We welcome the OHT Taskforce's approach to the proposed installing of LIDAR and other measures in the network to ensure that we mitigate or prevent over-height loads causing the community problems on the network.

We are obviously concerned that any disruption to traffic on our roads is hurting the NSW economy, which is why we need to keep freight moving safely on our roads, ensuring that any changes to current regulations are only introduced after there has been thorough consultation with industry.

We would suggest respectfully, that freight performs an important role for the community in not only moving goods and keeping businesses and community supplied - and the percentage of over-height vehicles causing concerns for the community is very small number compared to the number of trips/loads moved every single day through the network.

REST AREAS

Heavy vehicle rest areas (HVRAs) in strategic locations in and around the greater Sydney basin are critical if we are to reduce driver fatigue, fatalities and trauma on NSW roads.

Yet the shortage of suitable HVRAs across the Sydney road network continues to place increasing physical and mental pressures on truck drivers.

For example, there are no rest areas within the metropolitan area where trucks can park up out of the traffic, while waiting to deliver to/from Port Botany or other major transport hubs.

According to RFNSW members, there needs to be shorter distances between HVRAs across major roads to help manage driver fatigue.

HVRAs need to be properly constructed, including noise baffling to ensure Thermo King refrigeration units on trucks don't disrupt other drivers trying to sleep; the availability of tail-in parking and larger parking bays for High Productivity Vehicles.

RFNSW maintains that HVRAs must be safe, decent and clean and include usable toilets, soap, hand-dryers, sanitary bins, lighting, tables and sheltered area/s and drinkable water – at standards expected by the community.

We believe that rest area toilets and facilities be at the same standard that a white-collar worker would expect from their employer.

At a time of growing labour shortages, it is crucial that we attract more female drivers into the industry. But this can only be achieved if the Government invests in the construction of safe, hygienic HVRAs, where women drivers are well-catered for, in a safe environment.

However, a significant caveat is that HVRAs be used for the purposes they are built – they should not be de-facto depots/yards for other operators to park up their truck and or trailers for a day, a night or a week, as they seek new work. Nor are they parking spots for caravans and light vehicles. It is with this in mind that any proposed HVRA would need to be policed to ensure that it is used for the purposes it is meant – drivers who actually need a rest. These rest areas cannot be a leg up for free-riders in an economic sense. Our members in NSW significantly invest in employees, training, safe equipment, depots, land and also pay considerable tax as responsible businesses. Some of our RFNSW members have been contributing to the NSW economy for over 100 years.

Western Sydney has been identified as the location for a proposed HVRA and NSW Roads Minister John Graham is seeking input from industry.

One of RFNSW's members from Western Sydney has put forward a novel concept of a user-pay system for a 'super HVRA', including: a hotel, P.O Box, steak house, grocery store with packaged microwave food to go, parking for up to 500 long vehicles, weigh bridge, warehouse with forklift for hire for load adjustments; tyre service, mechanical, fuel, laundromat, amenity blocks, BBQs, gymnasium, and a Government office for all authorities and offices for lease. Businesses would pay rent, parking spaces to be booked in advance or on a casual basis, with the HVRA facility to be paid for in 20 years.

Instead of carriers needing depots in each State, they would be able to book parking spaces which improves flexibility if your fleet increases/decreases as a result of work volumes. There would be no need for long term lease agreements, with safe, secure parking in each State. Local carriers would be the same owner drivers or company trucks parked off our streets. The facility would allow to hook-up multiple trailers and head to a similar facility in the other State without permits or being in City traffic, unhook, do deliveries and return.

The RFNSW member also believes driver physical and mental health would be improved, having facilities that are easy to access and having the ability to meet with friends and colleagues for their 24 and 48 hour breaks and get out of the truck.

Police and NHVR, who 'chase trucks up and down the highway', would be able to walk around the HVRA facility, checking vehicles and drivers before they leave. Heavy vehicles with multiple trailers leaving would be easily tracked, with cameras on the weighbridge, giving a time stamp and linked to weighbridges down the highway, so no need for them to stop.

The RFNSW member said the concept would require land to be available in the correct positions to work effectively, citing Eastern Creek on the M7 and Foreshore Drive at Botany, as ideal locations.

RFNSW looks forward to consulting with Transport for NSW to create additional HVRA's which will undoubtedly improve driver well-being, fatigue management and safety for all road users.

DRIVER TRAINING

The fact is, the transport industry is experiencing a dire shortage of qualified drivers.

One Sydney transport operator recently said that he has been forced to employ drivers that he 'never would have taken on five years ago', because of the labour shortages impacting small businesses like his. The cohort of drivers is changing in so many ways.

The increase in inexperienced drivers getting behind the wheel is compromising safety for all road users and leading to incidents such as over-height vehicles obstructing traffic on tunnel roads.

We believe drivers entering the industry aren't being properly trained and educated – with no formal requirements for 'basics', such as learning how to measure a heavy vehicle's height and load; or how to load and secure the load.

RFNSW members provide extensive training for their employees. However, the standard of new staff being recruited into the industry needs to be higher, from the training providers who provide initial training.

Training providers need to be regulated because the current education and training regime is simply not good enough. We believe that training providers should be included in chain of responsibility Legislation, to ensure quality courses and that they understand that a 'tick and flick' system for the training and education for new drivers is not sufficient, if we have any chance of building a new skilled workforce.

RFNSW believes technology is already underpinning better safety and productivity across the supply chain by helping easing pressure/s on drivers. Many of our RFNSW members use telematics like Teletrac Navman or MT Data, 'Seeing Machines' or similar real-time technology like Optix, to ensure there is driver fatigue and distraction management for their operations. Telematics for instance, can send warnings back to the transport firm's base to alert them the driver is speeding over the limit.

RFNSW is concerned that there is little to no training for car drivers that include heavy vehicle awareness and education.

From our perspective, it makes no sense that learner drivers are taught about driving in the wet and at night, but not about driving near heavy vehicles. Perhaps it is time for heavy vehicle awareness and education to be mandatory in a Learner's 120-hour training module.

After all, as many of you would know, driving on Sydney roads day after day takes not only patience and skill, but requires professionalism and experience. We need to support operators to support truckies to deliver for the NSW community.