

Improved Approaches to Heavy Vehicle Driver Fatigue Under Way

After over five years in the making, new national heavy vehicle driving hours laws now operate in almost all Australia's heavily populated areas, stretching from Queensland to South Australia.

The laws were a big step forward for introducing more consistent and sensible driving hours regulations. For instance:

- for the first time, the regulated driving hours schemes in place in States and Territories based on 12 hours driving a day were made highly consistent;
- the chain of responsibility principle was introduced by most governments to make others in the transport chain responsible for driving hours offences;
- the Transitional Fatigue Management Scheme was introduced to provide additional scheduling flexibility; and
- a national log book was introduced.

At the same time the national laws were being progressed, the WA and NT governments introduced a different approach to managing fatigue based on Codes of Practice under OH&S laws. In addition, a pioneering fatigue management pilot program is being undertaken by Queensland Transport and the Australian Trucking Association, to develop an approach to driving hours based on controlling the factors that contribute to fatigue.

Nationally, we are moving in the right direction on fatigue and are a world leader, but we still have a fair way to go to develop solutions which take greater account of fatigue research and which give industry sufficient operational flexibility. What has been achieved so far is only the first step in coming up with better solutions for the long haul.

The national laws are based on tightly controlling the hours of driving and work. However, controlling the time on the task is a poor substitute for managing the factors that contribute to fatigue. Research has shown that 'sleep debt' (where a lack of sleep can build up over time) and driving at night (when the body should normally be asleep) are perhaps the two main interrelated factors.

Other causes include limited flexibility in scheduling, inadequate preparation before a trip, poor health and lifestyle, noisy and hot truck cabins and inadequate sleeping arrangements when away from home. The other downsides to the prescriptive approach are well known and include a lack of flexibility, the use of an outdated

form of recording (log books), a difficulty of enforcement and poor compliance levels.

The NRTC has recently commenced a project to develop a broader approach to controlling heavy vehicle driver fatigue. This will take into greater account the principles of fatigue management, build in greater flexibility and more closely align with the current OH&S approaches. The outcomes will include new national rules, education materials, administrative guidelines and codes of practice and are expected to be completed by the end of 2001.

As one input into the process, the NRTC has joined with the Australian Transport Safety Bureau and the Land Transport Safety Authority of New Zealand, to form a group of Australia and New Zealand's leading fatigue experts to advise on options for improvements in existing policies. The group also includes members with extensive industry experience, and representatives of transport safety agencies and the NRTC. The group's report is expected to be published later this year.

The review of the national regulations is one major aspect of a comprehensive reform of fatigue management and driver health by the NRTC, transport agencies and the industry over the next few years as part of the Third Heavy Vehicle Reform Package. The reform is being partly funded by the Commonwealth and will include:

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The expert group, left to right: Barry Moore, Bryan Bottomley, Narelle Haworth, Darren Nolan, Ann Williamson, Chris Foley, Anne-Marie Feyer, Drew Dawson, Laurence Hartley, Peter Bass. Absent: Philippa Gander, Chris Brooks.