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How old is too old?

In my April column I detailed that it has been a long road to recovery for new truck sales in Australia. I went on to explain that slow sales coupled with an ever increasing freight task had resulted in an aging of our truck fleet and that this lack of fleet renewal severely hampers the uptake of new safety, environmental and productivity technologies in trucks. I illustrated this fact by looking at the example of Underrun Protection Systems (FUPS), mandated by the Australian government from 1st January 2012, taking on the Truck Industry Council's (TIC) estimates, 21 years from now to achieve 95 percent in-service fitment, that is beyond 2039 before the 11 lives saved per year predicted in the Government's FUPS Regulation Impact Statement could be realised.

So how does our truck fleet age compare with other countries around the world? TIC has undertaken some research that looks at this very issue. Now I must say upfront that not all countries use the same definition for a "truck", even in Australia there are differing definitions between the designations, in our Australian Design Rules a truck is a vehicle above 3.5t GVM, while our States and Territories only require a truck driver's license above 4.5t GVM, this is also the point at which the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator (NHVR) has jurisdiction over heavy vehicles. We have Australian Bureau of Statistics data that details our average fleet age above both these markers, these are listed below along with a number of other countries for comparison:

Drayage vehicles in the State of California (USA):	5 years (trucks - ocean ports to greater metro and State)
Hong Kong:	5 years (>3.5t GVM)
China:	6 years ("heavy vehicles" not defined)
Germany:	6.7 years (Includes LCV's plus >3.5t GVM)
Sweden:	7.1 years (>3.5t GVM)
France:	7.3 years (>3.5t GVM)
Great Britain:	7.6 years (>3.5t GVM)
South Africa:	8.9 years (>3.5t GVM)
Japan:	11.1 years (>3.5t GVM)
USA:	14.8 years (>6.35t GVM)
Noting USA:	11.4 years (2.72t to 6.35t GVM)
Australia:	14.0 years (>3.5t GVM)
Australia:	14.9 years (>4.5t GVM)

Of course we do not have the oldest trucks in the world, the Mexican fleet is estimated to be 17.9 years old, Greece 18.9 and Poland's trucks have an average of 20.7 years, but do we really want to benchmark ourselves against those countries.....

Truck Industry Council Limited

ABN 37 097 387 954

T: (02) 6273 3222 E: admin@truck-industry-council.org W: www.truck-industry-council.org

It is plainly obvious that a fleet age in the order of twice that of countries that we would typically compare ourselves with is not a desirable position to be in. When you consider that we follow Europe, Japan and the USA with the adoption of safety and environmental regulations, typically by about five years (in the case of adopting Euro VI and equivalent emission standards this will be a lag of ten plus years) add to that our increased fleet age, we effectively adopt these technologies across our truck fleet **two decades** later than in the country of their origin. This is hardly a satisfactory outcome for heavy vehicle safety in Australia.

It is difficult to determine a suitable age for the Australian truck fleet, but there are a couple of details that we know for certain, our most recent (January 2017) average truck age of 14.9 years is simply too old and the other is, that this age is not going to reduce to levels currently seen in many other western countries without action from our government. Actions in the form of incentives to assist heavy vehicle operators to upgrade their aging rigs with newer, safer, more environmentally friendly and more productive equipment, are required.

Phil Taylor
President, Truck Industry Council