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Road Safety Requires a Modern Australian Truck Fleet

Over recent months there has been much commentary about road safety particularly around heavy vehicles following shock revelations that truck deaths in NSW rose during 2017 by 86 per cent. Tragically, road deaths involving trucks leaped from 29 to 54 last year.

I particularly noted comments by Toll Group Managing Director, Mr Michael Byrne, wherein he called upon the federal government to mandate measures that incentivise Australian truck operators to invest in newer, safer and more sustainable trucks. I further noted comments attributed to the Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) suggesting the need for a “safe systems” approach in order to stem road trauma. This systems approach comprises:

- improved road safety management;
- safer roads;
- safer road users;
- improved post-crash response systems; and
- safer vehicles.

What caught my eye was the fifth component to this system, that of “safer vehicles”.

Australia has an old truck fleet and by default the question can be posed, “Does Australia have the safest truck fleet possible?”

The average age of the Australian Truck Fleet in 2017 was 14.9 years with recent trends confirming the age of the fleet is rising due in part to the ever increasing national freight task*. Forty-two percent (42%) of the nation’s truck fleet was manufactured before 2003. These vehicles have fewer safety technologies when compared to a truck sold in 2018. To put this into perspective there are 119,448 pre-1996 trucks representing 26% and 73,441 trucks, or 16%, being trucks manufactured between 1996 to pre-2003. These trucks are 12 month fully registered vehicles operating on our roads many in urban operations, not seasonal farm trucks and the like. In this regard Australia compares unfavourably with the rest of the world in terms of fleet age.

That is not to say that an older truck is unsafe, a properly maintained truck is safe, however the point needs to be made that Australian trucks are not as safe, (nor environmentally friendly, or as productive) as they could be. The take up rate of these more advanced trucks with their significantly improved safety features in Australia is poor and thus the old truck fleet. Industry leaders such as Toll’s Mr Byrne are right to say that the advanced safety

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

technologies available in today's trucks must be taken up by operators in order to improve road safety.

The choice is not whether Australia uses trucks, they are essential to our standard of living, the choice for the Australian people is whether we have the most modern fleet possible. Rail cannot solve all freight movements. The implications are profound: Australians can have safer trucks on the road or we can continue with an old Australian truck fleet.

The Truck Industry Council's (TIC) recent budget submission calls upon the Federal Government to take the necessary steps to encourage operators to modernise their ageing fleets. These steps include for example, financial incentives to purchase a new vehicle and regulatory changes allowing higher axle masses for new ADR 80/03; diesel and alternatively fuelled or powered trucks.

Having the Government support the objective of a more modern truck fleet by means of incentives for operators to upgrade their fleets will speed up the introduction of safety technologies. There is a role for all governments, state and federal, in this discussion and I encourage transport ministers to look to the road safety benefits that would accrue from a more modern Australian truck fleet.

An older Australian truck fleet means that technology advances found in more modern trucks such as safety, environmental and intelligent transport systems are not being introduced into the Australian market in a timely manner. The result is the Australian Government's failure to meet its own strategic road safety, environmental and economic objectives.

Australians want to be sure that trucks on the road today comprise a modern truck fleet. Settling for less would be to agree that it was acceptable to go to a hospital and receive treatment from 15 year and older medical technology.

We wouldn't settle for that and nor should we accept an old Australian truck fleet.

Phil Taylor

President, Truck Industry Council

(* Trucks above 4.5t GVM - ABS Motor Vehicle Census January 2017)