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Government putting the brakes on truck safety

I outlined a few months ago in this very column, that the introduction of new Australian Design Rule (ADR) regulations for heavy vehicle safety and environmental standards had sadly slowed noticeably over the past decade. I detailed how an apparent lack of action by the Department of Transport in Canberra, in combination with successive federal governments, had led to Australia falling well behind Europe, Japan and the Unites States of America in the adoption of heavy vehicle safety and environmental standards and I highlighted that our regulations were being implemented typically ten or more years behind those countries mentioned above.

So while our regulators are dragging their feet, Truck Industry Council (TIC) members, the truck manufactures and importers, are not. TIC members have been proactively implementing advanced safety systems on their Australian model trucks for a number of years now. Take for example Autonomous, or as the Australian Department of Transport is calling it, Advanced Emergency Braking Systems (at least the acronym is the same, AEBS). The first TIC member's started fitting AEBS to their local models over five years ago, back in 2015. That year slightly less than 200 trucks were sold with AEBS, but it was at least a start. Fast forward to 2020 and TICs T-Mark data for January to June new heavy truck and van sales, those vehicles with a GVM above 3.5 tonne, shows that over 7,000 heavy vehicles have been sold with AEBS this year. That same T-Mark data displays that in total, approximates 23,000 trucks and vans above 3.5 tonne GVM have AEBS fitted and are operating on our roads today. TIC estimates that by year end 2020, more than 14,000 new heavy vehicles fitted with AEBS will enter service this year, bringing the total number of trucks and vans, above 3.5 tonnes GVM, on our roads to more than 30,000. This is a great result that will benefit heavy vehicle road safety outcomes.

Digging a bit deeper into the T-Mark data we can gain an understanding of the types of vehicles that operators are purchasing with AEBS. Thus far in 2020 the numbers look like this:
3.5 tonne to 4.5 tonne GVM rigid trucks and vans – 47.2 percent fitted with AEBS
Over 4.5 tonne to 12.0 tonne GVM rigid trucks and vans – 24.8 percent fitted with AEBS
Over 12.0 tonne GVM rigid trucks – 25.4 percent fitted with AEBS
Over 12.0 tonne GVM prime movers – 54.0 percent fitted with AEBS

In summary, at the top and bottom ends of the Australian heavy vehicle market, one in every two new trucks sold in 2020 will have AEBS fitted. While one in four new medium and heavy duty rigid trucks will hit the road this year with AEBS. All well before our government has a regulation in place.

While this proactive stance to heavy vehicle safety by the truck manufacturers and importers must be commended, the bigger picture pertaining to heavy vehicle road safety remains less positive and is a problem requiring government intervention. I am talking about the age of the Australian truck fleet. Due to the average age of our fleet, currently standing at 14.9 years and trending higher, it is taking decades for new safety technologies to penetrate through the Australian truck fleet. Again, taking the example of Autonomous/Advanced Emergency Braking Systems and given the current AEBS uptake in new truck sales, current fleet age and applying current fleet renewal rates, it would take until, 2050, for 95% of the fleet to be fitted with AEBS. Were it not for past and current AEBS truck sales, this date would likely blow out to beyond 2055.

The sobering truth is that despite the best efforts of the truck manufacturers and importers who are implementing advanced safety systems on their Australian truck models well before they are required by regulation to do so, it is government inaction with regard to addressing the age of the Australian heavy vehicle fleet that is putting the brakes on truck safety.

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