

On the road again

Managing fatigue in transport

Driver fatigue is believed to be a significant cause of many accidents in the transport industry. In a recent survey of truck drivers conducted by the Transport Workers' Union, 61 per cent of drivers said that they had been involved in accidents or near misses due to fatigue. A recent Community Attitude Survey (CAS) conducted by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau indicates that community recognition of fatigue is increasing. Throughout the past five years, the belief that fatigue is one of the three main causes of road accidents has gained significant credibility in the community (increasing from 19 per cent to 35 per cent of those surveyed).

Research indicates that a motor vehicle driver is more likely to have an accident between the hours of midnight and 8am than during the other hours of the day, with the highest risk occurring between the hours of 4am and 6am. The risk of having an accident after driving for more than eight hours is almost twice that for motorists who have driven for fewer hours.

Some of the key factors contributing to fatigue in the transport industry include failure to take rest breaks, poor quality of rest obtained and the length and timing of rest periods. An important issue, therefore, is the provision of adequate road side rest areas and commercial truck stops for heavy vehicle drivers.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts recently inspected several road side rest areas, a commercial truck stop and the operation of one of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) Safe-T-Cam traffic monitoring systems as part of its inquiry into managing fatigue in transport.

During the inspection the members noted a difference between the non-commercial facilities provided for motorists and those for heavy vehicle drivers. While many of the new rest stops for motorists have excellent facilities, those currently available for trucks still lack even basic facilities. For example, many road side rest areas failed to provide rest rooms, litter bins, water, shade, and entry and exit ramps of sufficient length.

The absence of adequately equipped road side rest areas highlights an area of concern voiced by many truck drivers at public hearings and in submissions. The House Transport Committee has received evidence from truck drivers suggesting that rest areas on some trucking routes are like 'tinpot shows' – commonly lacking rest rooms, litter bins, shade/shelter, having time restrictions, limited space, and according to one driver they are sometimes used to house gravel from nearby road works. Some drivers have stated that they are reluctant to leave their vehicle unattended in fear of break-ins, a fear increased by poor lighting or no lighting at all. Others have said they find it difficult to sleep because of the continual noise of the traffic passing on the highways.

Large commercial truck stops afford truck drivers the opportunity to take sufficient rest breaks. The House Transport Committee inspected a commercial truck stop that was equipped with a service station, special dual sided pumps, convenience store, diner, laundry, bathrooms, a television room, occasional hairdresser and ample paved parking space for trucks. The proprietor told the House Transport Committee that some key factors in attracting drivers was that they could sit down to a "decent" meal chosen from a varied menu and be provided with individual bathrooms for having a shower.

Drivers can be on the road for days without the comforts of being close to home. Commercial truck stops such as the one inspected by the House Transport Committee give drivers of heavy vehicles the convenience of being able to fill their tanks with fuel, perform routine maintenance work on their vehicle, shower, eat, relax by

the television, have their hair cut, buy incidentals and sleep at the one secure venue.

However, the House Transport Committee has received evidence indicating that for some truck drivers the existence of such a facility does not necessarily encourage them to take advantage of it. The Committee has heard that with consignor, company, personal and financial demands, some drivers of heavy vehicles are too pressured to reach their destination to take the time to rest and, as a consequence, are regularly driving in a state of fatigue.

The House Transport Committee was impressed by the RTA's automated monitoring system based on digital camera technology that is partially aimed at combating this problem. This system, known as Safe-T-Cam, is located at 21 sites throughout NSW and collects vehicle data including detection of drivers travelling beyond prescribed hours. As a heavy vehicle passes through a Safe-T-Cam site a photograph is taken of the number plate. This enables the system to determine whether there has been a possible violation of driving hours since the last photograph was taken. There are penalties for road user violations.

Many of the witnesses to the inquiry have stated that they believe that Safe-T-Cam is an effective system because it encourages drivers of heavy vehicles to take the rest breaks they are required to do by law.

Committee Chair, Mr Paul Neville MP, said "Inspections like these give the Committee the opportunity to take on board some of the issues relating to rest facilities that have been raised by the road transport industry during the inquiry. Committee members and staff were able to see the importance of the role that fully equipped commercial and non-commercial truck stops play in managing fatigue in transport."

For further information:
www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cta/index.htm
 or Adam Cunningham on (02) 6277 4597



Committee Chair Paul Neville (centre) with Committee member Stuart St Clair (left) – finding out from truck drivers about fatigue in transport.