

PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

Improving road safety Heavy vehicles

Roads and Traffic
Authority of NSW

May 2009

About the audit

There were 3,032 crashes involving heavy vehicles on NSW roads in 2007.

Improving road safety and the regulation of heavy vehicles in NSW is the responsibility of the Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW (RTA). The RTA uses annual vehicle inspections, on-road compliance checks, Safe-T-Cam cameras and fixed speed cameras to test compliance with heavy vehicle safety regulations.

In this audit we wanted to assess how well the RTA manages on-road enforcement to reduce the number and severity of crashes involving heavy vehicles. Specifically we wanted to find out how well the RTA:

- deters and detects breaches of heavy vehicle safety regulations
- enforces heavy vehicle safety regulations.

We also examined the RTA's response to the crash that occurred on the F3 freeway at Mooney Mooney. On 22 October 2004 an unregistered semi-trailer loaded with 18 tonnes of building material crashed into 34 vehicles travelling north on the F3 freeway. One woman died and two people were seriously injured.

Audit opinion

The RTA's approach to detecting and enforcing heavy vehicle safety has produced mixed results.

There have been overall decreases in the number of crashes and people killed and injured in crashes involving heavy vehicles between 2002 and 2007. However, the number of crashes and the number of people injured have increased between 2006 and 2007.

The RTA has been most successful in reducing the number of crashes due to the vehicle's condition. It has also been successful in reducing the number of crashes and deaths due to fatigue.

In contrast, there has been a recent increase in the number of crashes involving speed. And nearly half of all fatal crashes involving heavy vehicles occur in high speed zones.

The RTA regularly surveys the speed of heavy vehicles and nearly half are found to exceed the 100 km per hour heavy vehicle speed limit.

However, we found that the rate of infringements for speeding offences by heavy vehicles is three times lower than the rate for other vehicles.

There are possibly many reasons for this lower rate of speed infringements for heavy vehicles. One is that the RTA's fixed speed cameras located in 110 km per hour zones cannot distinguish a heavy vehicle from other vehicles and, therefore cannot differentiate those exceeding the heavy vehicle speed limit of 100 km per hour.

And while Safe-T-Cam is supposed to manage both speed and fatigue, we found that while it can detect speeding offences it is not used to enforce them.

There are other areas where we think that the RTA can improve its approach. While it would be impossible for the RTA to detect all instances where the vehicle or driver fails to comply with regulations, we do expect the RTA to maximise detection, especially where it targets high risk vehicles.



Further information

Barry Underwood
Phone: 02 9275 7220
Email: barry.underwood@audit.nsw.gov.au

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Internet site: www.audit.nsw.gov.au

Yet we found the rate of detection varied in different locations across the state with no apparent reason. In one location, every second vehicle inspected was given an infringement notice whereas in another location, a breach was detected in only one in every ten vehicles inspected.

Just prior to the fatal crash at Mooney Mooney in 2004, the RTA had failed to detect and stop the unregistered semi-trailer that caused the crash. The RTA has since made a number of changes to improve how it detects and stops an unregistered heavy vehicle.

We recognise that the RTA is unable to prevent all crashes. However, we consider that the RTA could do more to improve its ability to detect and respond to high risk heavy vehicles travelling on our roads.

Key findings

How well does the RTA deter and detect breaches?

We found that the RTA is not always in the right place at the right time to maximise deterrence and detection of heavy vehicle safety breaches.

There are a number of ways in which the RTA can improve its effectiveness. These include:

- introducing a risk-based approach to annual inspections
- ensuring that minimum standards for vehicle compliance inspections include critical safety checks and that these checks are completed
- ensuring that checking stations use the same criteria to identify heavy vehicles that must be inspected
- using a mix of overt and covert methods to detect breaches.

How well does the RTA enforce heavy vehicle safety regulations?

We found that on-road enforcement can be effective in reducing the number and severity of crashes involving heavy vehicles, although the RTA has achieved mixed results.

For example, the number of crashes involving heavy vehicles has decreased by 11 per cent from 2002 to 2006, but increased by more than five per cent from 2006 to 2007. The number of people killed has fallen by nearly 29 per cent since 2002. However, when compared to all fatal road crashes, the percentage involving heavy vehicles has increased from 16 per cent in 2003 to nearly 22 per cent in 2007.

The recent increase in the number of crashes involving heavy vehicles have been due to speed. We found this corresponded to a period of decline in the number of infringements issued for speeding.

Summary of recommendations

We recommended that the RTA:

- improve the detection and enforcement of speeding offences by heavy vehicle drivers
- better identify and respond to high risk heavy vehicles travelling on our roads
- more effectively use risk assessments to be in the right place at the right time.