

**Media Release**

1 September 2023

**DROWSY DRIVING EMERGES AS A DOMINANT RURAL ROAD RISK**

*New research investigates the behaviours fuelling a spike in fatalities on regional roads*

Following a devastating surge in fatal crashes across Australian roads this year, the Australian Road Safety Foundation (ARSF) has released new research<sup>1</sup> detailing the escalating risks taken by drivers in rural areas.

Despite fewer than a third of Australia's population residing outside major cities<sup>2</sup>, deaths on rural roads accounted for almost two thirds of last year's road toll<sup>3</sup>. In fact, of the 1,188 Australian road deaths across the last 12 months, 773 (65%) occurred on rural roads compared to 415 (35%) that were recorded in metropolitan areas.

Released today to mark the sixth annual Rural Road Safety Month (September), the research reveals a clear driver disregard for safety on regional roads.

Over half (51%) of Australian drivers openly admit to breaking road rules when travelling on rural roads, slipping into bad habits like driving over the speed limit (41%), using a mobile phone behind the wheel (13%) and crossing a double line (11%).

Equally concerning is the revelation that while almost two thirds (58%) of drivers take a trip on a regional road each month, a quarter (25%) struggle to maintain focus due to fatigue. Despite over two fifths of Australians (42%) planning rest breaks during their journey, a fifth (17%) admit to feeling fatigued but push on in an effort to reach their destination sooner.

Additionally, one in 10 drivers (10%) have experienced terrifying moments of microsleep, where they were awake but unable to recall driving.

ARSF Founder and CEO Russell White expressed deep concern over the findings, considering the tragic number of fatal road accidents already seen this year.

"As the road toll continues to rise across almost every state and territory, it is disheartening to discover that nearly one third of Australian drivers persist in taking unnecessary risks under the false assumption of safety, which may be a critical factor for why Australian roads are becoming deadlier," Mr White said.

"It's also worrying to see the number of Australians partaking in drowsy driving. Despite Australians being well aware of the dangers, we continue to see them engage in this perilous dance with disaster, jeopardising not just their own lives but the lives of others on our roads."

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted by Pure Profile on behalf of the Australian Road Safety Foundation, June 2023, n=1005 nationally representative by gender, age and location of Australian drivers aged 18 years and over

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government Institute of Health and Welfare, accessed 29 June 2023 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communication, BITRE Road Deaths Database, accessed 29 June 2023

The research also raises cause for concern that road trippers' unpreparedness is putting lives at risk. Almost two thirds (58%) shared that they don't put their car in for a service before hitting the road, while more than six in 10 (61%) do not have fuel stops planned out.

Similarly, rural drivers demonstrate lack of resilience if faced with unexpected dangers, with almost nine in 10 (88%) not having a plan for what to do if faced with an extreme weather event and almost eight in 10 (79%) not knowing what to do if their car breaks down.

This unpreparedness is despite two thirds of drivers (66%) experiencing some form of dangerous situation while on rural roads in the past. In fact, more than one third (38%) have had a warning light appear, broken down or run out of fuel while road tripping, while three in 10 have faced unexpected road closures and dangerous weather conditions (32% and 31% respectively).

The research also revealed a number of alarming insights including a rise in road aggression combined with continued bad behaviour and a decline in common road etiquette such as the 'thank you wave.'

Although 97 per cent of Australian road users believed a simple 'thank you wave' could contribute to improved road safety, half (50%) believed this symbolic gesture of road kindness was on a sharp decline across the country<sup>4</sup>.

Mr White said the ARSF is urging all rural drivers to revive the 'thank you wave' and help initiate a positive shift towards fostering a culture of sharing the road.

"We encourage every person that drives on regional roads to embrace the 'thank you wave' as a symbol of commitment to road safety. By doing so, we can collectively foster awareness among fellow road users that their choices affect more than just themselves," he said.

Lisa Harrison, CEO Insurance Product & Portfolio at Suncorp Group said:

"Rural Road Safety Month is an important community initiative that helps keep road safety top of mind for everyone driving in the bush.

"Drivers must adapt to their surroundings, be alert and drive to the conditions at all times, especially while driving on rural roads because it can be very different to driving in capital cities or suburbs.

"It doesn't matter if you live in a rural, regional or remote town, or if you're just driving through, every one of us can make a commitment to drive more safely," she said.

With an overwhelming majority of Australians (82%) intending to take at least one road trip on rural roads in the next 12 months, drivers are calling on greater education and safety awareness. In fact, nearly half (46%) believe more road safety education is needed to prevent tragedies from occurring.

Throughout Rural Road Safety Month, individuals, businesses, and community organisations are encouraged to share information, host local events, wave in greater respect for the roads and those we share it with and #chooseroadsafety not just across the month, but 365 days of the year.

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<sup>4</sup> Research conducted by Pure Profile on behalf of Australian Road Safety Foundation between 3-9 March 2022 with a sample size of n=1,016 adults aged 18 years and over

For further information visit: <https://arsf.com.au/rural-road-safety-month/>.

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**Assets:**

- Video News Release
- Launch images

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**About Australian Road Safety Foundation:**

The Australian Road Safety Foundation (ARSF) is a not for profit organisation dedicated to improving road safety outcomes and reducing the rates of death and the mental and physical injuries that result from road crashes. It achieves this through innovative road safety awareness programs, education, advocacy, research and community engagement.