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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety
Inquiry into Reducing Road Trauma in Regional NSW: Speeding, Fatigue, and Drink/Drug Driving

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Introduction

This submission responds to the Joint Standing Committee's call for input into strategies to reduce road trauma in regional New South Wales (NSW), particularly in relation to key risk factors: speeding, fatigue, and drink or drug driving.

The high and persistent road toll in regional areas reflects systemic issues that have not been effectively addressed. In 2023, regional road fatalities increased by 29.3% (as of 23 November 2023) compared to the 2020–22 average.

This occurred despite significant funds being available to address road safety.

The $104 million underspend from the 2022–23 Community Road Safety Fund budget raises critical concerns about whether resourcing is being effectively allocated to initiatives with a proven impact.

Road safety is at a critical crossroads. Clearly the nation's road safety performance has been heading in the wrong direction in recent years.

The Australian Road Safety Foundation (ARSF) continues its support for better infrastructure and safer vehicles. But it is also critical that we address how to improve the performance of all road users.

One of the biggest challenges is how to overcome the apparent levels of community apathy and complacency not only around road safety, but to other interrelated facets such as personal responsibility, respect for authority and injury prevention.

For example, the findings from the 2023 Safety Performance Indicator (SPI) Observational Study conducted by Taverner Research for Transport for NSW (TfNSW) offer an interesting insight to the safety mindset of the community.

The study looked at compliance for seatbelts, mobile phones and wearing protect gear for motorcycle riders and cyclists. It found that whilst seat belt compliance remained consistent in 2023 (99.2%) when compared with 2020 (99.3%) results, other areas had decreased in the same period.

Consistent with 2020, the results in 2023 showed that drivers who were observed not complying with seatbelt laws were nearly three times more likely to be observed not complying with mobile phone laws (10.3% observed not complying with both seatbelt and mobile phone laws, compared to 3.9% observed complying with seatbelt laws, but not complying with mobile phone laws).

Also, during this period there was a reduction in the number of motorcycle riders and cyclists wearing protective gear.

Around one out of ten (11.6%) motorcyclists were observed wearing full protective gear (i.e. helmet, upper body, lower body, feet and hands) in 2023. This was significantly less than in 2020 (13.6%).

The study also showed that wear rates for protective upper body clothing (49.1% in 2023, 58.7% in 2020) and protective gloves (52.2% in 2023, 63.6% in 2020) decreased significantly in 2023 compared with 2020. The wear rates of protective lower body clothing (16.7% in 2023, 18.1% in 2020) and protective footwear (57.3% in 2023, 55.5% in 2020) didn't change significantly in 2023 when compared with the findings from 2020.

These findings add further evidence of a social chance towards risk and personal safety since 2020. They also again highlight the complexity of the road safety issue.

It can't be addressed through a single line of action; it will require a range of activities happening in parallel over a long period of time.

A stronger focus on localised interventions, community-led programs, school-based education, and better implementation of existing recommendations is urgently needed to address this crisis. Based on the terms of reference, our opinions are as follows.

a) Research and Data on Regional NSW-Specific Crash Factors

Available research consistently shows that regional NSW experiences higher rates of serious injury and death on the roads compared to metropolitan areas. Contributing factors include:

- Longer travel distances and isolation, increasing fatigue risk and emergency response times.
- Higher posted speed limits and more frequent high-speed crashes.

- Limited access to public transport, increasing reliance on private vehicles, often in unsafe conditions.
- Demographic and socioeconomic differences, including younger and older driver populations, limited access to driver education, and social disadvantage.

In addition, the is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in road trauma statistics, often linked to systemic inequities in licensing access, road infrastructure, and enforcement.

Crashes in regional areas are more likely to involve multiple fatalities, head-on collisions, and loss-of-control incidents. This data supports the need for region-specific strategies and more locally informed approaches.

As stated earlier, the findings from the 2023 Safety Performance Indicator (SPI) Observational Study conducted by Taverner Research for Transport for NSW (TfNSW) between the dates of 15 February and 1 April 2023 also offer interesting insights into community attitudes towards an overall safety culture.

While seat belt use among light vehicle drivers and passengers has remained consistent, there has been a notable decline in mobile phone compliance among light vehicle drivers.

This drop in compliance in 2023, compared to 2020, is largely due to an increase in drivers holding mobile phones while stopped at traffic lights or stop signs.

Motorcyclist helmet usage remains very high, nearing 100%. However, the use of other protective gear—particularly lower body protection—continues to be significantly lower. Since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of motorcycle riders and passengers wearing bright or bright-accented helmets and clothing, though dark colours are still the most commonly worn.

Among bicyclists, helmet-wearing rates have decreased since 2020 across all age groups, with the most significant decline observed among children. Helmet compliance remains especially low among teenagers, with a marked drop since 2020.

b) Effectiveness of Current Strategies and Programs

While some state-wide road safety campaigns have shown positive awareness impacts, their effectiveness in regional settings remains mixed. Key issues include:

- Lack of regional tailoring to reflect the lived experience of rural and remote communities.
- Low engagement with enforcement and education campaigns in areas with limited policing presence and fewer community resources.

- Underinvestment in fatigue and alcohol/drug prevention initiatives, particularly outside major towns.
- Insufficient school-based and community-led education that builds long-term behavioural change.

Many regional communities report that existing strategies feel "top-down" and disconnected from local challenges. This gap has a direct impact on behaviour and engagement.

The NSW Road Safety Action Plan 2022–2026 has the stated goal of 'no death or serious injury occurring on the road transport network by 2050.

At the time of writing, the state's road fatalities for 2025 alone stood at 196 people, 30 more people than the same period in 2024.

These figures alone suggest that the current strategies are not proving to be effective.

c) Proposed Measures to Reduce Road Trauma in Regional NSW

1. Fully Allocate and Transparently Use Available Road Safety Funds:
The Community Road Safety Fund must be deployed more effectively, with regional allocations prioritised for high-risk areas and linked to evidence-based outcomes. The $104 million underspend in 2022–23 is unacceptable when lives are being lost.

2. Expand and Invest in School-Based Road Safety Education:
Begin early, consistent road safety education in primary and secondary schools, focusing on risk perception, decision-making, fatigue, speed awareness, and drug/alcohol harm. Leverage local police, trauma survivors, and road safety practitioners to deliver relatable sessions.

3. Support Community Ownership and Localised Programs:
Fund local councils, Aboriginal community organisations, schools, and health services to co-design road safety initiatives. Peer-to-peer education, localised campaigns, and community ambassador programs have shown strong results when properly resourced.

4. Implement Mobile Fatigue and Drug/Alcohol Testing Units:
Expand random testing and fatigue checkpoints, especially on known high-risk areas and during peak travel times (e.g. holidays, harvest season).

5. Build Regional Road Safety Hubs:

Create dedicated regional road safety hubs that coordinate local data collection, education, and engagement with stakeholders. These centres can work alongside existing services to deliver ongoing support and innovation.

6. Increase Levels of Visible Policing:

Whilst we are supportive of camera detection methods and systems, we believe that there is also a need to increase the number of police on the road. We are of the opinion that a heightened level of physical police presence is also essential to encourage compliance and safer road user behaviours.

d) Implementation of Recommendations from the 2023 Auditor-General's Report: 'Regional Road Safety'

The Auditor-General's 2023 report clearly identified key weaknesses in governance, funding transparency, and data use. Urgent action is required to:

- Ensure road safety planning is evidence-based and community informed.
- Address funding underspends with clear performance measures and accountability.
- Establish robust mechanisms for monitoring progress and evaluating impact.
- Engage regional stakeholders in decision-making, not just consultation.

The failure to implement these recommendations in full continues to place regional lives at risk.

e) Other Related Matters – The Role of Community Ownership

Community engagement is not a "nice to have" – it is a necessity. Rural and regional road users are more responsive to local voices, relatable messaging, and practical support.

To reduce road trauma, NSW must shift from centralised, short-term campaigns to long-term partnerships with local people. This includes:

- Ongoing support for youth leadership programs in road safety.
- Culturally relevant approaches in Aboriginal communities.
- Support for schools, TAFEs, and community groups to deliver practical driver training, licensing, and safe travel messaging.

Conclusion

Regional road trauma in NSW is preventable. But it requires bold, place-based investment education and real community partnerships – not just campaigns, road improvements or enforcement. With proper funding, locally led programs, and stronger education, we can turn these trends around.

There is also a need to alter that traditional narratives associated with road safety and the community apathy towards improving road safety outcomes.

In many respects, the roads are a "melting pot" of a range of issues. That means that no one area of action or one aspect of government will have the capability or the capacity to address this issue holistically.

It will require a long term, multiple stakeholder approach to deliver a significant change in the social and cultural norms that exist across the community broadly.

We urge the Committee to prioritise full use of available funds, increase support for campaigns such as Rural Road Safety Month, increase school and community-based education, and ensure local people are at the heart of regional road safety planning.

The Australian Road Safety Foundation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry and supports all efforts to reduce road trauma across regional NSW.

We would be delighted to work collaboratively with the NSW State Government to help design and deliver effective, evidence-based interventions that save lives and create safer communities.

Regards,



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