



## **National Farmers' Federation**

# **Submission to the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator Draft Heavy Vehicle Productivity Plan 2020-25**

Prepared by Mr Liam Watson

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# NFF Member Organisations





The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is the voice of Australian farmers.

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities.

Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

The NFF represents Australian agriculture on national and foreign policy issues including workplace relations, trade and natural resource management. Our members complement this work through the delivery of direct 'grass roots' member services as well as state-based policy and commodity-specific interests.

# Statistics on Australian Agriculture

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Australian agriculture makes an important contribution to Australia's social, economic and environmental fabric.

## **Social >**

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There are approximately 85,000 farm businesses in Australia, 99 per cent of which are wholly Australian owned and operated.

## **Economic >**

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In 2018-19, the agricultural sector, at farm-gate, contributed 1.9 per cent to Australia's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The gross value of Australian farm production in 2018-19 is estimated to have reached \$62.2 billion.

## **Workplace >**

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The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector employs approximately 318,600 people, including full time (239,100) and part time employees (79,500).

Seasonal conditions affect the sector's capacity to employ. Permanent employment is the main form of employment in the sector, but more than 26 per cent of the employed workforce is casual.

## **Environmental >**

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Australian farmers are environmental stewards, owning, managing and caring for 51 per cent of Australia's land mass. Farmers are at the frontline of delivering environmental outcomes on behalf of the Australian community, with 7.4 million hectares of agricultural land set aside by Australian farmers purely for conservation/protection purposes.

In 1989, the National Farmers' Federation together with the Australian Conservation Foundation was pivotal in ensuring that the emerging Landcare movement became a national programme with bipartisan support

## **Executive Summary**

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The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) supports the vision outlined by the NHVR in its *Draft Heavy Vehicle Productivity Plan 2020-25*. We welcome the focus on improving access arrangements by reducing the need for permits and improving the capability of road managers. We are also supportive of the intent to encourage the uptake of safer, more productive vehicles.

## **Introduction**

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The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission on the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator's (NHVR) *Draft Heavy Vehicle Productivity Plan 2020-25*.

Heavy vehicle regulation remains a policy priority for the NFF. Our [2030 Roadmap](#) - the strategic vision for growing Australian agriculture to \$100 billion by 2030 - prioritises supply chain efficiencies as a key component of achieving this vision.

For this reason, the NHVR's five-year strategic plan focused on productivity improvements is of considerable interest to the NFF. The task of improving freight productivity is all the more urgent considering productivity has actually decreased by 0.6 per cent between 2010 and 2018<sup>1</sup>.

The comments provided in this submission build on previous NFF submissions to the National Transport Commission's review of the Heavy Vehicle National Law and the Productivity Commission's report on National Transport Regulatory Reform. These are available on the NFF's website or by request.

The submission addresses the three core objectives identified in the Plan.

## **Objective 1: Provide access certainty and consistency**

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### Goal 1: Increase gazetted and pre-approved networks to remove the majority of permits for low-risk movements

The NFF supports the NHVR's vision for 'a future where permits are required by exception rather than as a rule'. The need to obtain access permits to move agricultural vehicles on public roads continues to impose an administrative burden on primary producers. While the new *Class 1 Agricultural Vehicle Mass and Dimension Exemption Notice 2019* (Class 1 Notice) has reduced that burden, the NFF believes further improvements could be made to the Notice. We look forward to working with the NHVR and jurisdictions in identifying and implementing those improvements.

Increasing the number of gazetted networks, thereby removing the majority of permits, would be of significant value to our industry. The NFF welcomes the proposal to use the NHVR Portal to identify routes with repetitive permit applications and granted consents to support a case to road managers for gazettal.

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission 2019, *National Transport Regulatory Reform Draft Report*

Our experience with the process for amending the Class 1 Notice demonstrated the importance of a 'strong governance model' which allowed the NHVR to work 'collaboratively and expeditiously with [road managers]'.

We also support historic access permit applications being made more accessible to industry (with the data appropriately de-identified). This would enable industry to identify the routes and networks which would produce the greatest value if they were gazetted, and work with the NHVR and the relevant road managers to implement these notices.

We support the NHVR's plan to implement the agreed 17 recommendations from the 2018 Oversize Overmass review for which it has responsibility.

With regard to recommendations 12, 14 and 15 of the report, however, we note the following caveats:

*(12) The NHVR implement regional teams to work with Road Managers, this should include co-location with State Road Managers.*

We consider employing a Heavy Vehicle Liaison Officer in each jurisdiction would be more effective.

*(14) Transport and Infrastructure Council to agree to the NHVR investigating alternative permit approaches, including higher fees for expedited/guaranteed turnaround times.*

Turnaround times should be made shorter and enforceable for all permit applications.

*(15) Transport and Infrastructure Council agree to develop and implement an industry-centric triaging system for bridge assessments, within 12 months.*

This triaging system should be established for all road assessments, not just bridges. We are aware of one case where negotiations to secure road upgrades so that access issues can be resolved that have been ongoing for three years.

#### Goal 2: Provide greater certainty for Performance-Based Standards (PBS) vehicles

The NFF supports the NHVR's position that PBS vehicles should be provided with access to existing equivalent prescriptive gazetted networks. PBS vehicles, by definition, pose less of a risk to safety and road infrastructure due to the requirement that they meet higher performance standards.

We also support road managers being provided with PBS configuration data and vehicle performance information to assist their route assessments for PBS access permits and to assist with the gazettal of PBS-specific roads.

#### Goal 3: Understand the real capacity and capability of roads and bridges on key freight routes

The expertise and resources required to assess road infrastructure impose a considerable burden on local government. Yet road managers play a critical role in improving the efficiency of agricultural freight supply chains.

The NFF strongly supports any NHVR initiative that builds the capacity of road managers to expeditiously assess road infrastructure and assist them to make timely access decisions which accurately reflect the risk posed by any particular heavy vehicle.

Continuing the work of the Strategic Local Government Asset Assessment Project is one possible strategy. While we are unsure whether extending the scale and duration of this program would be the most effective means of improving the capacity of road managers, the cost to date of this program (\$8 million) compared to the estimated cost savings of improved heavy vehicle regulation (\$1.8 billion per year until 2050) - the majority of which is derived from improved access arrangements - suggests continuation and possible expansion of this program would be good value for money.

The NFF considers this reform would be well complemented by requiring road managers to apply the NHVR's guidelines when making access decisions. Currently, use of the NHVR's *Registered Access Vehicle Route Assessment Tool* is not mandatory and the NHVR's *Approved Guidelines for Granting Access* are not used consistently<sup>2</sup>. Consistency in the criteria on which access decisions are made is likely to lead to greater consistency in these decisions.

#### Goal 4: Understand how de-identified movement data can improve access

The NFF has, in the past, cautioned against the regulator placing too much emphasis on the merits of technology for regulatory purposes. The regulation of heavy vehicles should, as far as possible, be technology-neutral. The use of telematics with its associated fees (at least \$119 per month for telematics certified under the Intelligent Access Program<sup>3</sup>) is unlikely to be economically viable for small operators.

However, we also acknowledge the role of technology and the data it generates in increasing safety and productivity. In the case of safety, roadside enforcement is resource intensive and relies on probabilistic detection. The ability to monitor driver behaviour through, for instance, telematics, may lead to more efficient and well-targeted outcomes.

The NFF considers the NHVR's proposal to use GPS tracking data to understand heavy vehicle movements and inform access decisions as a potentially useful option worthy of further study. As the NHVR points out, road managers would be more likely to grant approvals, provide quicker responses and apply fewer conditions, if they were given greater assurance of what vehicles were moving where and how often.

#### Goal 5: Deliver a modern risk-based approach to access based on infrastructure capabilities

While we would not provide unqualified support for this proposal without the opportunity to examine the reforms that would be entailed, we view it as sensible and logical.

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<sup>2</sup> National Transport Commission 2019, *Easy Access to Suitable Routes*.

<sup>3</sup> National Transport Commission 2018, *Review of Regulatory Telematics*.

The NFF supports the use of access guidelines being made enforceable and mandatory and the recognition of precedents in access decisions (the 'envelope system' proposed in the 2018 OSOM Review). The underlying intent of these two reforms is to better align the access of any particular vehicle with its risk level (to infrastructure, and also to safety and public amenity). If this alignment can be done by bypassing entirely the need for a permit, the savings in time and cost would be considerably greater.

However, we would ask the NHVR to clarify what exactly is meant by 'self-assessment by industry and GPS tracking of heavy vehicles as an assurance mechanism'. The NFF does not support this proposal without a comprehensive account of the costs and responsibilities that would be imposed on industry.

## **Objective 2: Partner with local government to build capability**

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### Goal 1: Develop an education and support program for local government

The NFF supports the NHVR continuing to educate road managers to improve their capability and confidence to ensure future access decisions are informed, consistent and timely.

We also support Heavy Vehicle Access Liaison Officers being implemented in every state and territory. Feedback from our membership suggests that the Queensland pilot liaison officer has been of immense value to industry in improving access outcomes.

### Goals 2: Equip local government with route assessment products

The assessment method applied by road managers to access decisions should be consistent, to ensure equity and fairness and to reduce uncertainty. To this end, we support the NHVR's proposals to:

- Survey local governments to better understand their utilisation of current route assessment tools and guidelines and their preferences for new tools and guidelines;
- Partner with Austroads and jurisdictions to commence the development of nationally consistent access decision-making frameworks;
- Publish the revised, 'Approved Guidelines for Granting Access'; and
- Investigate the enhancement of RAVRAT or develop new route assessment tools, in particular to assist structural, pavement and swept path assessments.

We believe that route assessment tools and guidelines should take into account that the freight task is determined independently of access decisions. As the *Draft Heavy Vehicle Productivity Plan 2020-25* points out, '[some access] refusals are causing more damage over time compared to the impact of smaller general access vehicles required to complete the same freight task'. When making access decisions, it should be mandatory for road managers to consider the net impact of their decision on the national freight task, not just the immediate impact on a single vehicle trip. Because this is a complicated consideration, it should be incorporated into the various tools and guidelines mentioned above.

### Goal 3: Enable governments and industry to identify and advocate for infrastructure investment

The NFF supports the introduction of a mechanism by which industry and government can identify shortcomings in infrastructure investment and advocate for investment where it is needed.

The ability to identify bridges, culverts and sections of road where inadequate infrastructure is preventing access approvals, and target investment accordingly, would be of benefit to the industry.

However, we are concerned with such a mechanism being used to direct investment for purposes other than enabling access. Making the investment in any particular route proportional to the size of its freight task raises equity concerns. We consider it the responsibility of government to ensure all heavy vehicle drivers have access to safe, well-maintained roads, regardless of whether the road is in an urban centre or a remote location.

In terms of a platform, or hub, which enables freight bottlenecks and access issues to be identified, we would draw attention to the CSIRO's 'Transport Network Strategic Investment Tool (TraNSIT)'. TraNSIT provides a detailed map of routes and costings across Australia's entire agricultural supply chain. For each supply chain path, it selects the least-cost travel path as well as vehicle configuration, accommodating road conditions, driver fatigue regulations and vehicle decoupling costs. It outputs information on freight paths, detailed transport costs and critical link analysis, providing valuable input to inform infrastructure investment and regulatory decisions.

Developing a similar platform which identifies repeated denials of permit applications on the grounds of inadequate infrastructure, and targets investment accordingly, is an action which we believe would have value.

### **Objective 3: Promote safer and more-productive vehicles that are better for the environment and communities**

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#### Goal 1: Encourage the uptake of modern and safer heavy vehicles

Modern vehicle designs which are larger and heavier but do not pose an increased risk to safety and infrastructure should be permitted to drive on Australian roads. To the extent that they will achieve this goal, we support the NHVR's proposals to support the Commonwealth Government in further harmonising Australia's vehicle standards with international standards and to develop policies that provide regulatory options to grant access to roads for larger and/or heavier vehicles fitted with certain safety and environmental technologies.

An important consideration in mandating new vehicle standards is ensuring the transition does not see disproportionate costs imposed on small operators.

#### Goal 2: Deliver a modern approach to the PBS scheme

The NFF is supportive of regulation which encourages the uptake of PBS vehicles, which are both safer and more productive than their prescriptive counterparts.

We would emphasise, however, that any regulatory changes should not impose additional costs or increase the administrative burden on small operators.

### Goal 3: Promote awareness of planning and design for modern and safer heavy vehicles

The NFF supports the principle that planning and design standards must be progressively and suitably updated to provide access to modern vehicles that are safer, more productive and better for the environment.

## **Other issues**

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### Compliance costs

We note that the 2011 Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) from which the national regime of transport regulation arose has as one of its key deliverables a reduction in the regulatory burden and compliance costs for heavy vehicle operators. Being able to quantify these reductions is therefore key to assessing the extent to which the national regime has achieved its objectives.

For this reason, we support the recommendation of the Productivity Commission that the NHVR should conduct periodic reporting of its administrative costs and the compliance costs which it imposes on industry<sup>4</sup>.

### Agricultural Vehicles

We note that the Plan does not make any mention of agricultural vehicles. The needs and characteristics of agricultural vehicles are vastly different to the majority of RAVs. They travel on public roads infrequently and usually for very short distances<sup>5</sup>. We believe that the Plan should recognise these circumstances and that the NHVR should regulate accordingly.

Should you have any questions regarding this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Dr Pru Gordon on 02 6269 5666 or at [pgordon@nff.org.au](mailto:pgordon@nff.org.au).

Yours sincerely



**Tony Mahar**  
**CEO**

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<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission 2019, *Draft Report: National Transport Regulatory Reform*

<sup>5</sup> Franklin et al 2018, *Large Agricultural Vehicles on Roads in Australia*