

TRUCK DRIVER REST FACILITIES

Grievance

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [9.24 am]: I rise today to grieve to the Minister for Transport concerning rest facilities for truck drivers. COVID-19 left us with an indelible memory of empty supermarket shelves. In that panic-stricken time, we gave thanks for healthcare workers and school teachers, but we also were reminded of the value of our truck drivers. We discovered that fresh produce aside, the vast majority of groceries came from interstate. The adage “Without Trucks, Australia Stops” was never more pertinent. Truck drivers were and remain in short supply.

I fast-forward to January 2022, when flooding in South Australia severed the Adelaide–Perth rail link, with 300 kilometres of rail out of action for three weeks. Western Australia witnessed the worst food supply crisis in its memory. To her credit, the minister helped facilitate a land bridge with triple road trains bringing goods across the Nullarbor Plain to restock our supermarket shelves.

Hailed as heroes in a crisis, truck drivers do not have it easy. Their truck cab and the open road is their workplace and part-time home, but they need safe places to pull over, check their load, eat, shower, go to the toilet and sleep. That rest period ensures that they feel refreshed and are safe to get behind the steering wheel of a vehicle that may be pulling up to four trailers. It is a problem that is decades old.

Heather Jones has been campaigning for better rest facilities for truck drivers for 30-odd years. Co-founder of Pilbara Heavy Haulage Girls Group, Heather is concerned not only about clean toilets for women truck drivers, but also for the physical and mental wellbeing of the entire industry. As a long-haul driver of 30 years, she says it has never been more important to look out for fellow truck drivers. She says that truck drivers are away from home for long periods working in isolation, so having a rest area large enough for a number of drivers to pull over for the night brings a sense of community. She cannot understand why it is so difficult to get rest areas complete with toilets on the main freight routes, bearing in mind the provision of toilets is a workplace requirement. In the absence of toilets, and, more so, hygienic toilets, she says truck drivers are having to squat amongst spinifex or prickly moses wattle, all the while looking out for snakes and other creepies.

Heather credits former member Alyssa Hayden for her work to get three toilets on the 420-kilometre stretch of road between Port Hedland and the Auski roadhouse. They are the only bays at which quad road trains can stop with their four trailers, but she suspects it will likely take another 20 years of campaigning before a regular maintenance and toilet cleaning contract is effectively put in place. She says that these toilets are regularly unclean and full to overflowing, so truck drivers are forced to go to the toilet in the bush. Having heard that there is a \$300 000-a-year contract to clean the toilets, she wonders why they are not in pristine condition.

Some local governments are proactive in this space, but Heather says it is rare to find a local government that keeps its toilets and showers in top condition. She says from one end of the state to the other, there is an absolute shortage of rest areas in which drivers can pull over. Many were designed in the 1970s for rigid trucks, not the trucks with multiple trailers of today.

Heather sits on the federal Heavy Vehicle Rest Areas Initiative Steering Committee and says it is a problem that needs a strategic approach. We need rest areas that are big enough, on solid ground, secure, quiet and well lit, with toilets and showers and spaced out on the road network appropriately. She says that Karratha has a BP service station but nowhere for trucks to park. Drivers try to get some sleep on the roadside, but are disrupted by trucks and other passing traffic. The local road train assembly area has no showers, toilets or rubbish bins. The truck bay near the Dampier turnoff does not have enough sealed area for trucks to safely pull over, bearing in mind a triple road train is the same length as 11 cars.

She comments that all the rubbish bins have been removed from the rest bays in the Kimberley, adding that drivers live in their trucks and need to get rid of rubbish as they go. She has sent me countless photos of roadside rest areas with toilet paper strewn throughout the surrounding bush.

The dire situation at Eucla, 1 500 kilometres east of Perth, was brought to my attention recently. Truck drivers have nowhere to park, so they pull up alongside Eyre Highway to rest, with no toilet facilities or rubbish bins. Drivers unhook their trailers and try to find a quiet place away from the highway to park so they can sleep. A large number of travellers are heading across the Nullarbor since the border reopened and Great Northern Highway was impacted by flooding. It is extremely dangerous for truck drivers to hook up trailers and for travellers on Eyre Highway to interact with them. Truck reversing alarms can be heard all over the settlement as they hook and unhook their trailers. I understand there has already been one accident and several near misses, which is deeply concerning given Eucla is reliant on one Silver Chain nurse and has a dirt airstrip, so the Royal Flying Doctor Service plane cannot land in wet weather. That is a grievance for another day, but it was certainly brought to my attention by the Shire of Dundas that it was deeply concerned. Apparently, on occasions Eyre Highway has been closed to enable the plane to land, but that is hardly a satisfactory situation.

The single community ambulance would have to make a trip to the nearest medical help 900 kilometres away. Two recent government reports highlighted the need for rest areas for truck drivers—the 2019 Austroads *Guidelines for the provision of heavy vehicle rest area facilities* and the Australian government’s response to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee report, *Without trucks Australia stops: The development of a viable, safe, sustainable and efficient road transport industry*. The latter report was tabled in March 2022, noting guidelines for the design and placement of rest areas for highways and freight routes, along with a public education program to highlight the need for designated areas for heavy vehicles.

The former federal coalition government allocated \$60 million to fund rest areas as part of the existing heavy vehicle safety and productivity program, which was recently supplemented by the current government to bring the total commitment to \$140 million for heavy vehicle rest areas.

Minister, our state needs more truck drivers, and increased female participation will help to achieve that. I point to the ABC article of 22 April 2023 entitled “Filthy Toilets a Health Risk, Western Australian Female Truck Drivers Say”. The article goes on to state that those truck drivers quoted said toilets were “absolutely disgusting”. This is not the way to attract women to the industry. Given the vast distances in our state and the remote nature of the mining industry, Western Australia faces some unique challenges in offering roadside rest areas to truck drivers. It is a problem we cannot ignore. On behalf of the trucking community, I urge the minister to do more to provide decent facilities for all drivers, especially female drivers.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [9.30 am]: I thank the member for the grievance. I am quite surprised by it, actually. I am not sure what people have been doing or watching over the past few years, but we have taken up this area very, very strongly and are working with industry and the unions. The issue of lack of rest stops was raised with me soon after we won government by Tim Dawson and the Transport Workers’ Union, which represents truck drivers across the state. It was raised with me by the Western Roads Federation’s Cam Dumesny, and also by the Livestock and Rural Transport Association’s David Fyfe and his membership. I very much believe that we need to continue to support truck drivers in this state.

I am glad the member mentioned that we need more women in truck driving. That is why we have established a new course dedicated to introducing entrants into the truck driving industry. I was recently in Belmont and Redcliffe and talked to the current batch of entrants undertaking the course. We created a dedicated course, and 30 per cent of the course participants are women, compared with six per cent working in the industry across the state. I am very passionate about getting women into the business.

I totally agree that we need to have more and better rest stops, and that is what we are doing. You know what? I will take a grievance and I will treat it very fairly when I think we have not been doing anything on it, but we have been very active. We went to work with the commonwealth and secured tens of millions of dollars, and it continues. I will read out the list of the things that we are doing. We are actively working across government and with key stakeholders.

Has the member ever met with the TWU? I do not think he has. The group that represent truck drivers in the state has been at every meeting, supporting and encouraging us on what to do. When the member mentioned Alyssa Hayden’s name in this house, it got me quite distracted.

We are doing a lot and I will go through it. We have rolled out a number of tranches. As I said, of course we want to do more. The issues of who is cleaning rest stops and how we manage them are tricky. The distances are vast, and there are differing issues with how clean each rest stop is kept. That is one of the reasons the Main Roads Amendment Bill is in this place—namely, to allow us to facilitate the provision of more rest stops and more commercial arrangements to allow third parties to potentially help the state run rest stops in WA. The Main Roads Amendment Bill will facilitate this.

I will go through the list. In August 2018, tranche 6 of our program was announced, and tranche 7 was announced in 2020. This included new rest areas and construction of a heavy vehicle bay on Brookton Highway and at Mt Short; construction of a heavy vehicle bay on South Coast Highway at Munglinup; construction of a heavy vehicle bay on Brand Highway, Arrowsmith; and parking and decoupling bays along Great Northern Highway and West Coast Highway. I visited the new decoupling parking rest area near Coolgardie, including appropriate entry and exit points, something that the council was very much supportive of and keen to get done. I am glad we went out there. We opened it; I remember it as it was a big day in Coolgardie. The program also included new road train assembly areas on North West Coastal Highway; construction of two heavy vehicle bays on North West Coastal Highway near Northampton; and heavy vehicle parking on the Goldfields Highway and North West Coastal Highway. They are all the projects that have been completed, plus a number are underway, particularly in the Pilbara.

Mr K.J.J. Michel: And Karratha.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Yes—Karratha and Port Hedland. We will announce tranche 8 soon, which is more rest areas and other facilities with heavy vehicle rest areas along North West Highway, Great Northern Highway and North West Coastal Highway. Ablution and other facilities are on their way.

There are concerns about the cleanliness of ablution facilities across the state. It is a difficult challenge, because they are isolated and cannot be constantly monitored in many instances. There are 1 650 rest areas on the state road network, and ablution facilities are provided at 150 of these sites. In the Pilbara, rest areas are cleaned twice daily per 10-day work shift. Of course, the ability to continue to maintain these is difficult. Sometimes there is vandalism, and other times there are blockages and other more serious issues. We are working with industry. We are identifying a number of options, including working with the Western Roads Federation, the TWU and the Livestock and Rural Transport Association. We are looking at different options, such as whether we have swipe cards or whether the companies themselves are involved. We are currently finalising a review of the state's rest area strategy. This includes an analysis of the current facilities, including toilets.

We are constantly looking at how we can do this better. As I said, we have been made aware of some issues in Wubin and Eucla. Again, we are doing what we can to address those issues. We are really proud of our effort. Never before has there been more money injected into rest areas and truck facilities in the state. I am very, very proud of what we are doing in working with industry and working with the TWU. We will continue to work our hardest to make sure truck drivers get the services and facilities they deserve, because no-one values truck drivers in this state more than this side of politics. No-one values the work they have done year in, year out serving the state.