



National Farmers' Federation
Feedback Request on the
National Class 1 Agricultural Vehicle and Combination
Notice Issues Paper

16 November 2017

NFF Member Organisations



Australian Chicken Growers' Council Ltd



CANEGROWERS





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 across the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

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

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

Social >

There are approximately 85,681 farm businesses in Australia, 99 per cent of which are wholly Australian owned and operated.

Each Australian farmer produces enough food to feed 600 people, 150 at home and 450 overseas. Australian farms produce around 93 per cent of the total volume of food consumed in Australia.

Economic >

The agricultural sector, at farm-gate, contributes 2 per cent to Australia's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The gross value of Australian farm production in 2016-17 is forecast at 58.5 billion – a 12 per cent increase from the previous financial year.

Together with vital value-adding processes for food and fibre after it leaves the farm, along with the value of farm input activities, agriculture's contribution to GDP averages out at around 12 per cent (over \$155 billion).

Workplace >

The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector employs approximately 304,200 employees, including full time (217,000) and part time employees (87,200).

Seasonal conditions affect the sector's capacity to employ. Permanent employment is the main form of employment in the sector, but more than 28 per cent of the employed workforce is casual.

Environmental >

Australian farmers are environmental stewards, owning, managing and caring for 48 per cent of Australia's land mass. Farmers are at the frontline of delivering environmental outcomes on behalf of the Australian community, with 6.8 million hectares of agricultural land set aside by Australian farmers purely for conservation/protection purposes.

The NFF was a founding partner of the Landcare movement, which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

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Introduction

The farming sector is an active and passionate proponent of the initiative to prepare a new National Agricultural Notice (Notice), as it has the potential to remove red tape from farm businesses and create a sensible, practical and safe system for the movement of heavy farm vehicles on public roads. Industry and the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator (NHVR) have worked closely together throughout this process, and farmers were of the understanding that the reform process and harmonisation was the agreed aim by federal and state agencies. At the beginning of the process to introduce the new notice, NHVR had the clear aim that the new notice should cover at least 80% of the current fleet of agricultural vehicles. We were surprised therefore that the draft new notice does not push for reform of state zones.

The NFF has worked closely with our members, including both State-based farming organisations (NSW Farmers Association, the Victorian Farmers Federation, AgForce Queensland and Primary Producers South Australia) and national commodity councils (GrainGrowers, Cotton Australia and CANEGROWERS) to consider the issues paper and the common concerns we share.

All of our organisations agree that making this first notice as ‘future proof’ as possible is essential if we are to ensure continued growth in agricultural productivity and grow the value of Australian agriculture. The NFF supports the submissions of all of our members mentioned above. Their submissions contain more detailed responses to individual NHVR policy positions which are relevant to their particular states and we urge the NHVR to consider these alongside the current submission.

The NHVR issues paper clearly outlines that current regulations do not take into account the nature of the agricultural fleet, nor the quick decisions farmers need to make when managing crops. However, if adopted, the proposals contained in the NHVR issues paper would still require most movements of oversized agricultural machinery to be covered by permits to travel on public roads. Therefore, the proposals do not go far enough to address this key problem with the existing regulations – the key dimensions remain largely unchanged. That is the case with the current agricultural fleet, and this problem will only get worse over time

The Productivity Commission recently examined the role of regulation in agriculture, recommending that transport regulation needs to be proportionate to the risks involved. Moreover, the Productivity Commission recommended in 2017 in its report on the Regulation of Australian Agriculture that NHVR, road managers, and relevant third parties should “make greater use of gazettal notices or other exemptions for oversized agricultural machinery”.

What industry needs

The NFF concurs with the Productivity Commission and urges NHVR and road managers to consider the following:

1. Harmonisation is essential: the harmonisation process presents a unique opportunity to improve road safety, industry compliance and productivity – this opportunity must not be wasted.
2. Agricultural machinery moves on roads only when it is necessary, are slow moving and are on roads for (generally) short distances, and more often at key times such as sowing and harvesting. In most regions this would be a four to eight week window depending on the season.
3. Agricultural equipment needs to use public access roads to grow our food and fibre – and we need to get the regulatory system fixed. The vehicles and machinery are legally imported and legally registered – road access regulations should reflect this.
4. Regulation of agricultural vehicles has not kept up with changes in agricultural vehicle technology to date and this problem will only get worse over time as vehicle sizes increase.
5. Current data collections are inadequate and do not provide a reliable evidence base. The evidence that is currently available in the Austroads Research Report Future Challenges of Changing Agricultural Equipment indicates that risks are low, current regulations impose an excessive regulatory burden and hinder compliance.
6. Industry stakeholders want to comply with the law and ensure the safety of themselves and visitors to their communities. Therefore, road safety statistics relating to agricultural vehicles must be collected in a consistent manner.
7. Compliance and road safety data must be regularly provided to industry stakeholders to enable industry to work constructively with road managers and law enforcement to monitor agricultural vehicle safety data and proactively address safety issues through education and awareness activities.
8. Road managers should ensure that all options for managing risks are considered and that the costs to industry are minimised. Agricultural machinery and combinations should be covered to the maximum extent possible by a national exemption notice (ie not have to seek permits). This will ultimately improve compliance.

On the specific proposals contained in the issues paper, NFF supports the following NHVR policy positions:

- Agricultural definitions (Section 3)
- Vehicle coverage (Section 4)
- Access conditions (Section 6)
- Warning devices (Section 7)
- Height limits (Section 11)
- Rear overhang limits (Section 13)
- Speed restrictions (Section 15)

- Towed ratios load carrying vehicles (Section 18)
- Braking requirements for combinations (Section 19)

NFF supports-in-principle the NHVR policy position on network access classifications (Section 5), although it is our firm view that the changes are not ambitious enough. Most rural areas should have classification five limits with individual roads/bridges exempt if it can be demonstrated that a lower limit is necessary. All areas that the NHVR proposes to apply the limit 4 classification should instead have the limit 5 classification applied. The area in Queensland that the NHVR proposes to apply the limit 2 classification should instead have the limit 3 classification applied.

NFF also supports-in-principle the following policy positions but urges the NHVR to amend them in the following ways:

- Night travel (section 8) – NFF supports the development of a nationally-consistent framework to enable the movement of agricultural machinery at night. However merely codifying existing State policies is likely to be too restrictive, especially the requirement for two pilots for vehicles between 2.5 and 3.5 metres wide. The requirement for two pilot vehicles is a major expense for a farmer and sourcing pilots at short notice during harvest periods can be difficult, especially for small- to medium- family enterprises.
- Various dimension limits (particularly those outlined in sections 9, 10 and 12) – These limits are generally too low and will mean that too many vehicles will need to be covered by permits. These issues would be largely resolved by making the suggested changes above to the proposal outlined in section 5.

The opportunity for meaningful road reform

The first National Agricultural Notice must take account of the trend for agricultural machinery to be bigger (taller, wider and longer) in the future. Bigger machines result in enhanced productivity – a notice which inhibits on-farm productivity will hinder Australia’s agricultural sector from growing over the coming decade and beyond. Industry recognises the imperative that large, heavy farm vehicles are used safely on public roads – this is why we have supported the NHVR reform process and why we engage in the National Freight and Supply Chain Strategy. Nonetheless, without adequate access to the roads to move farm machinery, farmers cannot grow the food and fibre Australians rely on each and every day.

There is a significant opportunity for Federal and State Ministers to get behind real reform. A nationally harmonised approach, if done well, provides the opportunity to achieve the same or better road safety outcomes with lower costs imposed on industry, particularly across state borders. This will only become more important over time as contractors and shared agricultural machinery play a larger role in the industry. Uber and Airbnb are revolutionising the passenger transport and accommodation sectors, enhancing the productivity of those industries through greater utilisation of assets. The ability of contractors to move larger, more specialised and more expensive agricultural machinery on the road network and across borders will be fundamental to growing agricultural productivity in future.

If this process fails to reduce the administrative complexity associated with moving farm vehicles and fails to cater for the current and future size and scale of farm vehicles (which are legally purchased and registered in Australia), this will be to the detriment of both farmers and the community. It may also undermine the NHVR’s effort to create a new portal to streamline the permit system, allowing farmers with equipment outside the scope of the notice to obtain the relevant permits through a one-stop shop. Information gathered on this portal could also inform future road maintenance and infrastructure decisions, making its inception paramount.

The NFF seeks a commitment from the NHVR and road managers to work on setting practical limits on dimensions that encompass the reality of agricultural machinery and the movements they undertake. To be meaningful, the commitment must also extend to better data collection and dissemination so that road safety risks associated with agricultural vehicles can be accurately evaluated by all stakeholders in a changing environment. Ultimately, a realistic, nationally harmonised notice will improve compliance and could even improve road safety.