

The History of Australian Trucking

The Importance of Australia's Trucks

The Australian trucking industry boasts a long and impressive past and is now one of Australia's most important industries. In 2008, the Australian road freight transport industry accounted for 1.7% of GDP and employed over 245,000 people directly – almost 25% of all Transport & Storage employees in Australia.¹

Australia's First Trucks

Steam-hauled road trains used by the Yudnamutana copper mines in South Australia were amongst the first trucks to be introduced to Australia in 1863. Back then, they consumed a lot of wood and were seen as doing more harm than good.

In 1912, internal-combustion engines were introduced. By 1914, manufacturers around the world began developing vehicles powered by gasoline engines, and between 1913 and 1924 thousands of half-track vehicles towing two large trailers were produced.

By 1920 there appeared to be a general agreement by the various states that interstate road transport would not be tolerated. State governments extended rail lines, believing that rail transport would be sufficient.

Growing in Importance

By 1942, however, wartime conditions had brought on a shortage of coastal shipping and an overloaded railway system. Trucks were accordingly pressed into service to transport freight between capital cities.

The eastern states saw phenomenal growth in trucking. Road transport, in contrast to rail, involved minimal handling of goods and door-to-door services were an advantage for fragile products. There was still much resistance to long-distance road transport, though.

¹ ABS (2008g), *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly, August 2008* (ABS cat. no. 6291.0.55.003).

Resistance to Trucks

The government introduced the Road Maintenance (Contributions) Tax in 1956, to try to restrict the road transport industry. However, many truckers underpaid or avoided the tax altogether, considering it to be unfair.

The transport authorities also continued to pursue a range of restrictions on road transport: low speed limits, tight axle-weight limits and impractical laws limiting driving hours.

Love, Peace and Turbocharged Engines

During the 1960s, trucks were decoratively painted and fitted out to show individuality. The covering of loads also improved due to better canvas, double cover and a professional neatness in the way tarpaulins were fitted.

Throughout this time the price of trucks kept rising, as did the cost of tyres and fuel. Competition within the industry was fierce and written contracts for interstate cartage were extremely rare. Almost all contracts were verbal agreements and both sides generally acted in good faith.

The 1970's brought an important new advance in diesel engine technology in the form of the turbocharger. Truckers could now take advantage of the vastly improved performance of the 370 horsepower engine.

Economic reforms

Bigger trucks and bigger payloads meant higher road maintenance tax payments. By 1979 these payments were becoming increasingly costly and some truckers decided to rebel. The 'Razorback Blockade' of 1979 saw the abolition of the road maintenance tax.

During the 1980s, government reforms assisted the industry with the reforms to costs and licensing. The establishment of the Australian Road Freight Transport Advisory Committee was further evidence that the government was now willing to assist the industry.

In 1988 a second stage of transport reforms were announced. These dealt with uniform driving hours for the eastern states, lifting the highway speed limit for trucks to 100 km/h, revised registration charges and increased gross tonnage.

By the 1990s the big transport companies had refined the art of transport logistics, which significantly improved productivity and reduced costs.

The Trucking Industry Today

Beyond the year 2000 the Australian trucking industry has concentrated their efforts on improving the safety and efficiency of heavy vehicles. New technologies such as alternative fuel innovations, more comfortable cabs for the drivers and safety features to protect drivers and the community began to flourish.

Today, new innovations have seen the development of compliance and enforcement regulation, including chain of responsibility and performance based standards. Sustainable road transport and its effect on the natural environment are the next big challenges for the road transport industry and governments to address.