Prime Mover Magazine – TIC Article for August 2025 Issue.

Freight policy reform in Australia

In June, Transport for New South Wales (TfNSW) published their freight reform blueprint out to 2061. The report, *Delivering Freight Policy Reform in NSW*, led by Dr Kerry Schott AO and her panel, presents a raft of proposals and actions spanning road, rail, ports, and intermodal infrastructure, designed to address longstanding inefficiencies, modal imbalances, and regulatory inconsistencies in the freight sector.

The report was immediately endorsed by NSW Transport Minister, the Honourable John Graham and the NSW Government. The blueprint details that the proposed reforms could add $131.5 billion to the state economy and create 235,000 new jobs by 2061.

The new plan is underpinned by a technically detailed roadmap designed to reform planning, infrastructure, and regulation across the freight sector. Key to the roadmap are recommendations to enhance freight transport efficiency and sustainability in New South Wales. The proposed reforms address key challenges like population growth, decarbonisation, and technological advancements, aiming to boost the State's economy and create jobs. The plan includes a freight master plan, initiatives to increase rail freight, a new port policy, a focus on industrial land planning and workforce development and long over-due reform of the Road User Charging framework for road vehicles.

Picking up on the last point above, road freight proposed reforms include advancing distance-based charging models to replace declining fuel excise revenue, as well as establishing more consistent heavy vehicle access policies across jurisdictions. Local governments, which maintain over 90 percent of the road network in the State, will be supported through targeted grants and emergency infrastructure repair funding. The report also flags that, pending further review, there is the potential for increasing night-time freight movements to better utilise off-peak capacity on roads and rail. Decarbonisation actions form key recommendations in the plan, with the authors supporting measures such as a shift from road to rail, particularly for container movements from ports.

Port policy reform recommendations include, formal recognition that Port Botany will remain the state’s core sea freight container hub, noting that streamlining container terminal operations is a priority. In addition, supporting diversification at Port Kembla and Newcastle, specifically in response to declining coal export volumes.

Key proposals for rail include a formal review of the NSW rail access. Currently, passenger prioritisation on the Sydney Trains network severely limits freight capacity. The report calls for better coordination between the three separate rail systems in NSW; Sydney Trains; ARTC; and UGL Regional Linx. To increase rail's share of containerised freight, currently just 14 per cent out of Port Botany, the report recommends operational improvements including extending train lengths, time limits on-dock/rail interfaces, and increasing use of intermodal terminals, such as Moorebank and Enfield.

The report also highlights critical gaps in industrial land supply for freight use, storage, distribution, etc. Including recommendations for preserving future freight corridors, particularly in growth areas like Western Sydney.

Workforce Development was also highlighted as a key potential constraint for future freight efficiencies, with recommendations including support for industry-led programs to address workforce shortages, particularly in areas such as truck and train drivers and workshop technicians.

The proposed reforms are designed to improve the end-to-end freight logistics chain, ensuring a more efficient and sustainable freight system for NSW. The plan also emphasises collaboration between government, industry, and other stakeholders to achieve its objectives.

While New South Wales specific, this document offers insights and potential solutions for freight issues that are common up and down the eastern seaboard. For that matter, many of the issues raised and the proposed reform solutions have potential applications and benefits for the entire Australian freight sector.

The Truck Industry Council (TIC) applauds Transport for New South Wales for taking the national lead in this review of the freight reform. It was particularly pleasing to witness that the project team have proposed a raft of reforms, acknowledging that there is no one single fix, or "silver bullet", that can be applied to the freight sector. This aligns with TICs long standing position that a raft of reforms will be required to improve freight efficiencies and decarbonise the freight sector into the future.

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