

ONLINE ARTICLE

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The trucking industry is eyeing off a meeting of transport ministers next month as an opportunity to prevent the introduction of new heavy vehicle charges.

Industry associations are lobbying ministers to rethink their decision to increase the fuel excise by 10.4 percent and raise registration fees by more than 20 percent in some cases.

Only Western Australia and the Northern Territory voted against the new round of charges during the March 21 Standing Council on Transport and Infrastructure (SCOTI) meeting, deciding instead to introduce much lower fees.

But the vote the fell during the Queensland election, meaning the state did not vote on the charges. Furthermore, South Australia has signalled it, and other ministers, will address the industry's concerns on registration fees when SCOTI next meets on May 18.

"They're going to go to the meeting with at least a couple of ministers saying, 'Well, we don't like what we did a month ago, collectively'. And who knows, there may be some calling for a change," Queensland Trucking Association CEO Peter Garske says.

"I mean this is all uncharted waters really, and there is an opportunity, clearly, for industry to strike while the iron's hot with the minsters on the east coast and that's certainly what I'll be doing with the new minister."

Garske is due to meet newly-appointed Transport Minister Scott Emerson to highlight the industry's burning issues, and chief among them will be heavy vehicle charges.

"The recent decision on charges is harsh, unsustainable and near impossible for small operators to pass on to customers in the current economic environment," an issues paper from Garske sent to Emerson reads.

A spokeswoman for South Australia Transport Minister Patrick Conlon confirmed industry has raised its grievances about the impending charges, particularly concerning road trains where prices will rise by more than 21 percent.

“The minister has taken on those concerns and in the next SCOTI meeting next month I believe that they [ministers] are going to discuss it again and take those industry concerns to the meeting,” the spokeswoman says.

“Industry concerns are specifically about the road trains because they’re the ones that have received a significant increase.”

The cost of registering a double road-train will increase from \$11,438 to \$13,857 on July 1, with a triple road-train rising \$2914 to \$16,607.

Australian Livestock and Rural Transporters Association (ALRTA) Executive Director Philip Halton says the group has held a number of meetings with transport ministers.

“There won’t be many road train operators who can say they’ve seen a 21 percent increase in spending on any of the roads they drive,” Halton says.

“Most dirt roads, outback roads and far-inland regional roads don’t look like they are improving at all, and they’re certainly not 21 percent better than last year.”

While the charges are due to take effect on July 1, the Northern Territory decided on a 3.7 percent increase across the board from January 1, 2013.

Western Australia settled on 5.7 percent, with the price rises kicking in at the start of the new financial year.

Halton says the ALRTA wants ministers to limit the total charges to 5.7 percent. He has also suggested charges be delayed by six months if ministers reconsider them at the May 18 meeting.

Although Garske says he is looking forward to raising the industry’s case with Emerson, he adds that convincing Queensland, NSW and Victoria to budge will be a challenge.

“A real concern I have is how much impact we’re going to make on eastern states, where clearly the three eastern states have issues around government finance across whole of government and they’re all looking at maximising income and reducing expenditure,” he says.

“Against that backdrop we’ve got a very interesting task ahead of us to work with those three ministers individually and collectively.”

While the increases are partly due to a drop in the cost of registering A-trailers, the National Transport Commission (NTC) says the industry has not been paying enough.

In its charging proposal handed to SCOTI in March, the NTC claimed heavy vehicle charges were under-recovering year on year, prompting most ministers to vote in favour of clawing back lost revenue in one go.

Federally, the Opposition says it will look at moving a disallowance motion against the 2.4 cents-per-litre increase in the fuel tax. The price rise means the fuel tax credit will drop to 12.6 cents-per-litre on July 1 unless the disallowance motion gathers enough support.

Opposition spokesman on transport Warren Truss accused the NTC of using outdated figures to calculate the charges, claiming the industry will be overcharged by \$700 million.