

Motoring Matters

For Every Australian

Greens responses to AAA's motoring questions

In the lead up to the 2007 Federal Election, the Australian Automobile Association - on behalf of Australia's motoring clubs, their 6.5 million members, their families and all road users - put ten questions to the political parties on important road safety and road infrastructure issues.

1. What is your party's assessment of the state of Australia's road network?

On the whole, the Greens regard Australia's road network as comprehensive and functional, although there are areas, including many stretches of the Pacific Highway for example, that are in a state of disrepair or are frequently congested. While resolving these problems quickly is important, especially from a safety point of view, the answer may not always lie in increased road funding. For example, Australia's rail network, by contrast to the road network, is extremely poor. Australia needs to invest urgently and significantly in our rail network to move both our passengers and freight off the roads. Such investment would reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce imports of foreign oil and improve transport safety.

2. What is your party's policy on Commonwealth funding of road infrastructure?

In the 30 years to 2004, the Federal Government spent \$58 billion on roads and only \$2.2 billion on the rail system. However, rail transport is over four times more energy efficient than road transport. Australia needs to upgrade the nodal connections between road, rail and shipping. At present, about three quarters of Australia's non-bulk freight is carried by road. To shift to rail will require major increases in government investment.

The Greens would commit to a multi-billion dollar investment over ten years in public transport to maximise energy-use efficiency and minimise fuel consumption and reduced traffic congestion. In addition we would tie future transport planning to realistic forward estimates of the global oil price and its consequent increases in petrol prices.

3. How does your party intend to fund and accelerate major road infrastructure projects?

Each new major transport infrastructure project has to be judged on its merits, but compared to the old parties the Greens are likely to be much more supportive of major new rail projects. The polluter-pays principle is central to Green philosophy, so where new major roads are essential we are likely to be supportive of funding through toll collection.

4. Is your party focussed on the state of regional roads around Australia?

Rural and regional Australia deserves a network of safe, well maintained roads as part of an integrated transport strategy that increases the role of rail and public transport in the movement of people and freight. Road funding ought to prioritize safety, and not be contingent upon private sector developments or election pork barreling. The promised upgrading of the East Tamar Highway in northern Tasmania, for example, should not be contingent upon the guns Pulp Mill proceeding.

5. What will your party do to keep motoring affordable for Australians, in particular to ensure that fuel prices are competitive and in line with world/regional benchmark prices?

The Greens recognize that the era of cheap, plentiful and easily accessible oil is coming to an end. In order to keep transport affordable, we need to move fast towards more efficient cars, alternative fuels and public transport. Diminishing global oil supplies and the rapidly increasing volume of imported oil is a worry for Australia's trade balance and a key concern of the Australian Greens. Last year, Greens Senator Christine Milne initiated a Senate inquiry into Australia's Future Oil Supply and Alternative Transport Fuels.

The resulting report cited CSIRO research showing Australia will need to import more than half its oil needs by 2010. The Senate committee agreed this dependence will grow, with a projected cost of up to \$25 billion a year by 2015.

Australian governments should invest heavily in public transport, better connections between road and rail, and alternative fuels. At the same time, we should be making the cars that are on the road more fuel efficient by setting mandatory efficiency standards.

6. What is your party's view on the use of alternative fuels in motor vehicles - in particular ethanol?

The Australian Greens would introduce a 10% minimum biofuel use target for renewable transport fuel by 2020, in line with the EU's target. Australia's current target is to source only 1% of petrol demand from biofuels by 2010 and even this is unlikely to be met. Australia should adopt the EU standard of 10% minimum biofuel use by 2020.

Biofuel processes that convert a high proportion of the energy content of trees and crops, especially the second generation biofuels currently under investigation, such as ethanol created from cellulosic sources - eg from woody plants like oil-mallee in Western Australia - have the potential to cut greenhouse gas emissions significantly when replacing petrol, and can have added biodiversity and reduced salinity benefits. These deep rooted native perennials can supply a large proportion of Australia's transport fuel needs without competing for land with regular farm crops.

This approach has the added benefit of providing new employment and agricultural opportunities in regional areas where climate change and the drought are impacting on the viability of wheat and grazing. Biofuels made from by-products such as waste from cotton or sugar-cane farming have similar potential. Second generation biofuels have the best potential to overcome the conflict between food and fuel crops and the loss of native vegetation and tropical forests driven by the expansion of current biofuel crops, providing stringent biodiversity and environmental sustainability standards are imposed.

We would also establish a national, federally-funded goal of replacing 90% of petrol demand by 2050 with clean alternatives such as biofuels and electric vehicles powered from renewable sources.

7. Does your party have a view and any policy on traffic congestion and its cost to the national and regional economies?

The Australian Greens are in favour of the introduction of congestion taxes to alleviate congestion black spots in capital cities, as London has done, and invest the proceeds in public transport infrastructure. The Productivity Commission, in a recent report on energy efficiency, noted that congestion charging could deliver significant economic benefits, including improved fuel efficiency. It recommended further investigation of congestion charging.

The Greens would also:

- Remove the fringe benefits tax incentive to drive company vehicles long distances. Current fringe-benefits tax treatment of company-supplied vehicles assumes that the further a car is driven the smaller the private use component, which creates an incentive to drive company cars as far as possible. This should be replaced with a fringe benefits tax incentive to encourage employees to use public transport.
- Remove GST from the sale of biofuels and indefinitely extend the biofuel-excite holiday. Biofuel sales attract GST and from 2011 will attract fuel excise tax as well. Both of these financial disincentives to using biofuels should be permanently removed.
- Remove favourable tariff treatment of four-wheel-drive vehicles by increasing their import tariff from 5% to 10%, to bring it into line with regular vehicles, making exceptions for primary producers.

8. What is your party's policy on reducing Greenhouse gas emissions, particularly emissions from private vehicles?

Reducing greenhouse emissions is a top priority and transport is responsible for 15% of the nation's net greenhouse gas emissions. Car travel in Australia increased ninefold between 1947 and 1995, while average fuel efficiency has scarcely improved over the past 30 years. Using transport more efficiently will ease some of the problems caused by greenhouse gas emissions and the oil squeeze, but this alone will not be enough. Widespread uptake of renewable transport fuels is essential for Australia to eventually become independent of oil and to reduce its transport greenhouse gas emissions to zero.

9. What is your party doing to ensure motor vehicles are safer?

It is Greens policy to eliminate level crossings in urban areas, and ensure the presence of signals on all crossings in rural and regional parts of the national rail network.

10. What is your party's policy on driver education and training?

At present the Australian Greens do not have a specific policy on driver education and training.