COUNTRY ROADS, HEADLIGHTS (DAYTIME RUNNING LIGHTS)
7 July 2005

That this house urges the Minister for Transport to request the Road Safety Advisory Council to consider the merits of the state government encouraging or mandating the use of headlights by motorists its on country roads.

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): I rise to support this motion. A lot of concern has been expressed recently about the number of fatal crashes on South Australian roads. In March, we had the highest road toll for that month for 20 years when a total of 28 people died, including six who were killed over the Easter weekend. By mid-April, 48 people had died on South Australian roads, compared with 36 at the same time last year. Statistically, country roads are the most likely scene of crashes that result in death or serious injury. Figures from the Road Transport Department show that 58 per cent of fatal crashes and 47 per cent of serious injury crashes occur on rural roads. One of the issues for drivers on country roads is the visibility of oncoming vehicles from a distance.

According to a report on this issue by research engineer, Carleen Reilly-Jones, for the Roads and Traffic Authority of New South Wales, errors of perception cause up to 80 per cent of accidents. The use of daylight running lights increases the conspicuity of vehicles, which reduces the detection distances of approaching vehicles. These lights could be dimmed headlights or separately installed daytime running lights that are turned on as soon as the ignition is turned on. Reilly-Jones states:

The term `conspicuity' means `clearly visible, striking to the eye, or attracting notice.' This is a key to why daylight running lights work so well on vehicles—they not only made the vehicle easier to see, but they also catch the attention, drawing your eye to the presence of another vehicle, improving detection of vehicles in both the central and peripheral vision areas. If a vehicle is approaching, from say out of the corner of the eye, it may be seen as part of the total picture in the field of vision, but not picked out as an important feature. With lights on, attention is drawn to the oncoming hazard, and action can be taken.

I believe this to be particularly the case at dusk on country roads, with the setting sun flickering through the shadows of the roadside trees, obscuring oncoming cars, along with kangaroos wombat sheep and cattle that, unfortunately, cannot be fixed as easily. When vehicles use the lights during the day they appear to be closer and travelling faster than those which are not. If a vehicle appears to be closer and travelling faster, other drivers will exercise more caution. This could be significantly improved by requiring all drivers to use daytime running lights.

Overseas experience has shown that the use of such lights can result in a significant reduction in fatal crashes. A study in Canada in 1997 compared crash rates in the same year for cars with and without daylight running lights. They found an overall reduction of 5.3 per cent, mainly due to reduction in crashes of vehicles travelling in the opposite direction.

A study in the United States compared crash rates of specific GM, Volvo, SAAB and Volkswagen cars before and immediately after daylight running lights became standard equipment on these models. The results suggest a reduction in crashes between target vehicles and other vehicles in excess of 5 per cent and a reduction in vehicle and pedestrian collisions of about 9 per cent. A study in Texas in 2002 reported on a trial involving a campaign to encourage voluntary use of headlights during the day. Crash rates in the area where the campaign was run were compared with crash rates in neighbouring areas over the same period and showed a reduction of 58.7 per cent for fatal crashes and for serious injury crashes on major roads.

Daytime running lights may also make it safer for pedestrians and cyclists. In Sweden and other countries that have high daylight running lights usage rates, pedestrian and cyclists accidents have fallen. This appears to be due to the fact that lit vehicles are more visible to pedestrians and cyclists.

Carleen Reilly-Jones wrote in her report that it was a myth that vehicles travelling out of the sun with their lights on would be harder to see than those that were not lit, stating:

Research shows that this is not the case. Vehicles with daylight running lights are more visible, even with the sun behind them.

The case for daytime running lights to be used on motorcycles is even more compelling than it is for cars, as motorcycles are smaller and less visible than cars. Laboratory studies and field trials have shown that motorcycles equipped with daylight running lights are more easily seen than those without. Studies on the causes of motorcycle crashes have shown that motorcycles involved in crashes were less likely to have been using daylight running lights than other motorcyclists. When compulsory headlight use was introduced in Singapore, it resulted in a significant reduction in fatal crashes and serious injuries.

Recently, the RAA publicly expressed its support for use of vehicle lights during the day. Traffic and Safety Manager, Chris Thomson, said the RAA was convinced there were benefits for drivers in country areas in particular. One of my constituents, John Foster of Coulta, has done extensive research on this issue and he found that daylight running light units can be bought for a small cost and take about half an hour to fit. These units turn the lights on after the car has started and turn them off when the engine stops. The lights run on 60 watt power so there is no glare. In his initial research a few years ago, he found the ongoing cost to the motorist would be about three dollars a year for extra globes and fuel. I support the motion.