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Greenhouse gas emissions

Call for vehicle testing overhaul as Australia's emissions fight moves to roads

AAA says motorists are being misled by lab tests of emissions and fuel efficiency but green groups accuse it of delaying tactic

248 · 115

Katharine Murphy
Political editor
@murpharoo

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18.00 BST

Car exhaust fumes. Vehicle emissions are the next energy battle for the Coalition. Photograph: Voisin/Phanie/Rex/Shutterstock

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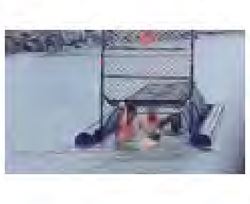

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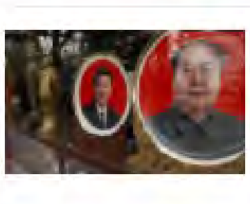

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Australia's motoring lobby is launching a campaign for "real-world" vehicle emissions testing, arguing the current system needs an overhaul because it is misleading consumers and regulators.

The Australian Automobile Association will on Monday release results from emissions and fuel consumption tests on 30 passenger and light commercial vehicles showing discrepancies between real world and official fuel consumption established in laboratory testing.

But the environment movement is preparing a campaign of its own, with the Australian Conservation Foundation urging its supporters to contact their state car clubs to demand groups like the RACV, NRMA, RACQ, RAA, RAC, RACT and AANT, support strong pollution standards for cars.

At least for once, don't let politicking kill off a workable energy policy
Katharine Murphy

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Green groups say the latest testing push by the motoring lobby is a delaying tactic.

The skirmish signposts the next big battle in energy policy, with the Turnbull government considering whether to introduce new vehicle pollution standards as part of measures to reduce emissions in sectors of the economy beyond the electricity sector.

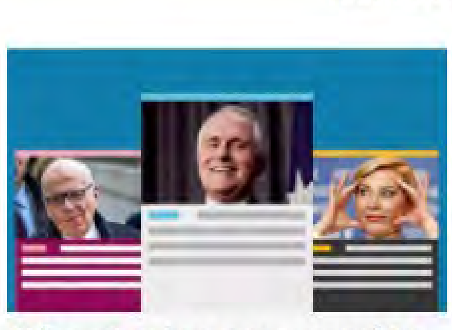
While the government unveiled its electricity strategy last week, it is still mulling its approach to the rest of the economy with a review of current climate policy, and the vehicles process, which is in gestation through a ministerial forum.

Now that the government has determined that electricity should reduce its emissions by 26% on 2005 levels by 2030 as a pro-rata share to meet Australia's commitments under the Paris target – the next challenge will be to set up emissions reductions measures for the rest of the economy, and do that at a time when emissions are rising in industrial energy, transport, industrial heat and agriculture.

Emissions projections from the Department of Environment and Energy show transport emissions increased 52% between 1990 to 2015, and they are projected to rise a further 9% above the 2015 levels to 2030.

Earlier this year, the government released a series of proposed targets for vehicles in discussion papers to seeking input from industry. Under the strongest target considered, new cars would have to cut their CO2 emissions by 45% below current levels by 2025 – from 192g of CO2 a kilometre to 105g.

The AAA claims a "clear link" between more stringent vehicle standards and increasing fuel consumption discrepancy. The AAA's report says as CO2 standards in Europe are becoming "more and more stringent" manufacturers are deploying technologies that are optimised for the laboratory drive cycle.



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The motoring body says current vehicle testing, which happens in laboratories, has led to consumers being given inaccurate information about fuel consumption and environmental performance in popular models.

"Popular cars on the Australian market are using up to 59% more fuel than advertised and emitting more than seven times the legal limit of some noxious emissions," said the AAA's chief executive, Michael Bradley.

Bradley said as emissions standards tightened, "the gap between laboratory results and real-world results is widening, meaning consumers and the environment are increasingly being ripped off."

The AAA says it wants a "real world" emissions test program for new cars, which would be modelled on the European standard, but modified slightly to take account of Australian conditions.

It says more stringent emissions laws are meant to reduce pollution and drive down fuel use, but real world testing suggests "such benefits largely occur only in the laboratory."

However, the project manager of ClimateWorks Australia, Claire Painter said Australian motoring bodies were "misleading consumers" by seeking to delay the introduction of standards until there was a better national emissions testing regime.

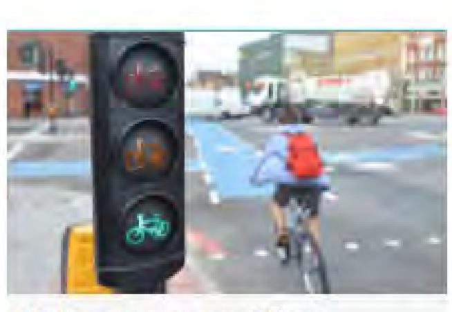
"The Australian Automobile Association continues to highlight discrepancies between on-road and in-lab performance of vehicles as a means of stymying attempts to improve the overall efficiency of Australian cars," Painter said.

"While it is important to improve emissions testing to provide greater clarity to consumers, it should not be used as a pretext for delaying the introduction of vehicle emissions standards which deliver real fuel savings to motorists."

ClimateWorks says if the government introduced the most stringent vehicle standard currently in contemplation, motorists would benefit from annual additional fuel savings of up to $519 for an average passenger vehicle driver or $666 for a light commercial vehicle driver.

As part of efforts to counter the lobbying by the motoring sector, the chief executive of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Kelly O'Shanassy, has already written to the heads of the state motoring clubs asking whether the AAA's position on climate pollution standards represent their own.

"I reckon Australians will be shocked that the organisations they trust to get them out of a jam when their car breaks down now appear to be trying to undermine the implementation of the toughest climate pollution standards," O'Shanassy said.



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"Of course we need rigorous testing of cars to make sure they are not polluting more than they should and the federal government is looking to introduce more accurate testing standards already being deployed in Europe," she said.

"But this isn't an excuse to stall the introduction of strong pollution and carbon emissions standards, in fact it's a reason to go ahead without delay."

A spokeswoman for the minister for urban infrastructure, Paul Fletcher, said the government would look at the AAA's data through the ministerial forum on vehicle emissions "which will work systemically through a range of issues and offers an opportunity to assess the merits of real-world testing".

She said Australia currently operated within an international testing system, and introducing an Australia specific real-world emissions tests would increase costs for motorists.

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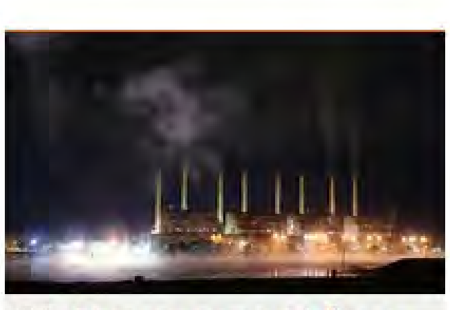

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Peter Campbell 3h ago · 0

I mostly drive purely electric cars for urban transport (one DIY conversion, now 9 years old, and one Mitsubishi iMiEV, now in our hands for 4 years) but our household does still have a petrol car which is mostly used when long range is required for trips out of town. It is the first car I have owned that does actually give in practice the fuel efficiency claimed for it. It is a petrol, manual Mk7 VW Golf 90TSI. For households that have more than one vehicle, it is very likely that the one that never leaves town could be replaced by an EV of modest range. A powerpoint at home is all the infrastructure you need. EVs are fun to drive (tons of smooth torque) and cheap to charge.

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Peter Campbell 3h ago · 0

I sent the following feedback to the AAA:

I have read your "Real World Driving Emissions Test Summary Report" found via https://www.realworld.org.au. I approve of the general purpose of real on-road testing of vehicles. This is appropriate for vehicles that operate in essentially the same way all the time.

However, I was dismayed by the misleading presentation of the results for the one plug-in hybrid that was tested. A plug-in hybrid operates very differently on short urban trips from longer extra-urban trips. Any test that lumps the results together will produce nonsense. It will be no more 'real world' that the tests you hope to replace!

Your "THE HYBRID ELECTRIC SHOCK - FOUR TIMES MORE FUEL" box of text on the web site is unfortunate and misleading. I assume the one plug-in hybrid, vehicle 27, was a Mitsubishi PHEV Outlander since that is the only available plug-in hybrid that is an SUV-style vehicle.

Your report only demonstrates how your single on-road test was just as inappropriate for plug-in series hybrids as standard vehicle tests. Obviously a PHEV's short trip performance will differ from its long trip performance by a far greater margin than for ordinary vehicles that operate much the same way all the time, whether fully fossil fuel burning, which includes non-plug-in hybrids such as the Prius, or fully battery-electric.

Obviously, a prospective owner of a plug-in hybrid will need to think about their likely mix of short and long trips. They would want to know how the vehicle performs for long trips when an initial battery charge would make a relatively small contribution to the total energy used for the overall trip. They would also want to know how the vehicle performs on short trips where the battery contributes all or most of the energy. They would then need to think about their personal mix of long and short trips - mostly short and only occasionally long, or vice-versa?

At the very least, any test report should include a prominent disclaimer that such vehicles' performance on a short city cycle should be considered separately from a longer extra-urban cycle. Your web site and report's presentation of the 'shock' result of 'four-times' more fuel should be put in the context of vehicle's claimed 1.9l/100km. I don't know exactly where the 4x comes from. The "Fuel consumption compared to official numbers" table has 166% ('cold start'. Does this mean charged?) and 337% ('warm start'. Does that mean the battery was depleted?). In any case, 4x1.9l/100km=7.6l/100km, which is not bad for an SUV-style vehicle, probably better than the non-PHEV version of the same vehicle, and similar to what my friends report for long trips without recharging their Mitsubishi PHEV Outlander. They also report a 'real world' result of using almost no petrol for months on end when they have only short trips for commuting, shopping and other local errands. From mixes of mostly short and occasional long trips, I have several friends who report lifetime fuel consumption from plug-in hybrid that are reasonably close to the sticker value of 1.9l/100km.

In part the blame perhaps lies with whoever decided to put a single-number claim on the vehicle sticker. That number will easily be wrong (better or worse) in any other test or with different assumptions or in different real worlds as experienced by people with different driving patterns. Since that single number is a fiction, expressing results from different tests as a percentage of that fiction will give numbers that are equally fictional.

I also wonder whether the tests were done on a vehicle with a depleted battery or starting with a full battery. Either way, the situation should have been prominently specified. What does the table with 'cold start' results mean for a plug-in hybrid? Surely a 'cold start' in a plug-in hybrid is heading off with a full battery charge and consequently driving purely electric with no tail pipe emissions.

In summary, any improved testing that purports to be 'real world' will need to be more nuanced to say anything useful about vehicles that shift from pure EV mode to series hybrid mode between shorter trips and longer trips.

Regards, etc.

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Watson42 → Peter Campbell 2h ago · 0

I can understand why the AAA tried to keep this report anonymous with respect to actual vehicles tested. Theirs' is just a general wake-up call to car buyers and the Australian Government which is belatedly considering introducing some kind of 'Euro' style emissions limits. Going to town on them for having applied a standardized real world test to a plug-in hybrid SUV, which behaves very differently over short battery powered urban trips is, 'over the top' and off topic', to put it mildly.
You may recall that unlike most of the developed world, Volkswagen didn't violate any emissions standards in Australia - because we don't have any! If we were simply to introduce the same test as car manufacturers have been gaming for years, we wouldn't achieve anything useful, either for fuel economy or the environment.

That is, in essence, why I have ceased supporting ACF. Too precious for their own good.

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Peter Campbell → Watson42 2h ago · 0

The reason for 'going to town' on this was that the AAA chose to highlight this particular example with a literal 'Shock Horror!' headline and prominent text box on their own web site. Had they stuck with highlighting the range of deviation they got with conventional vehicles and added a comment or even a small footnote to explain why the PHEV result was an anomaly, I would have been happy. However, they made the PHEV the headline and now that is being repeated insufficiently critically on the ABC and elsewhere.

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