

Radars – lifesavers or revenue makers?

On March 1, new penalties for speeding, the non-use of seatbelts and the use of hand-held mobile phones were imposed upon drivers in WA. A new ruling has also been introduced to make drivers responsible for ensuring all passengers are restrained, regardless of age.

The increase of fines and demerits is intended to make our roads safer by encouraging drivers to be more aware of their speed and habits on the road. Fines for cars or light vehicles caught speeding by 19km/h to 29km/h over the limit has increased from \$250 to \$300, while heavy vehicles have increased from \$350 to \$400. Speeding 29km/h to 40km/h over the limit will now incur a fine of \$700 – double the previous amount. Heavy vehicle fines have increased from \$500 to \$850.

Using a hand held mobile phone while driving now means \$250 fine and three demerits.

The government and road safety departments put these penalties into place because it's thought that they will improve driver behaviour, create more cautious drivers and save more lives. However, this is not always the case. At the time of going to press, there had been 38 fatalities on WA roads this year, predominantly in regional areas. Because of the sheer size of Australia and lack of Government funding, driving in regional areas is poorly policed and road quality low. Drivers in regional WA know there is less chance of getting fined so they often take the risk.

Legal?

Radar detectors have been given a very negative reputation. They are seen as a way for speeding motorists to avoid getting fines by letting them know when to slow down – i.e. when a police radar is coming up.

Many people also believe that radar detectors are illegal. That's actually untrue. There are no federal laws making them illegal, but there are state laws that ban the use of 'speed measuring evasion devices'. Western Australia however does not have any bans and WA drivers can still utilise this technology.

A safety radar detector will NOT help a speeding motorist to avoid a fine. If you speed, you will get caught. They will NOT warn you of fixed or red light cameras, unmarked police cars or lasers and are not very effective against radar speed cameras in open areas. Safety radar detectors constantly false alert on any radar signal (automatic doors, security alarms, etc). It's the equivalent of having your driving instructor next to you, regularly reminding you to watch your speed. It is a frequent and sometimes annoying reminder that maybe this alert is actually the police monitoring your speed. Everybody speeds - most often inadvertently, whether it's overtaking someone, simply keeping up with the traffic flow or missing a change in speed sign. A driver can incur numerous speed limit changes on the same stretch of road through school zones, road construction and built up areas. The safety radar detector alert reminds a driver to check the speed limit and in doing so, avoid a speeding fine.

Safety radar detectors are generally used by drivers who need their licence for work and who are constantly on the road. A few unfortunate speeding tickets and your income is gone. Miss or

ignore a 60km work zone limit and you could lose your licence. There is a misconception that hooners use and abuse radar detectors, but the fact is, radar detectors are expensive and most hooners would rather spend their money on making their car go faster than spending their money on a road safety device that will not protect you from a speeding ticket.

Revenue

The WA state government recently threw out plans to reduce the speed limits across the states due to community disapproval. Reducing the speed limits will only increase the number of people exceeding the speed limit, and therefore greatly increase speeding fine revenue. The driving community wanted the roads fixed and made safer rather than speed limits reduced. Data accumulated from accidents has shown that a higher proportion of accidents are due to driver inattention and misjudgement, than speed alone. Improving our roads is one sure way of reducing the number of fatalities from drivers just making a mistake. Studies also confirm a safety radar detector makes drivers more alert and aware on the roads.

A safety radar detector also acts as a Safety Warning System receiver, allowing the driver to receive warning messages from one kilometre off Emergency Vehicles, accidents ahead, road crews, school zones, school buses and accident black spots. This information can be invaluable to you and will also help the drivers behind you as you slow down on approach to the road hazard. Many John Deere tractors and loaders come equipped with a radar speed-signalling device, which will also provide a one kilometre warning to a safety radar that they are on the road ahead. There are thousands across Australia.

Radar, Laser and Fixed Speed Cameras
Radar uses radio waves, while a laser transmits a beam of invisible light. A radar beam can be 30 metres wide at a typical target range while the laser will be barely 45 centimetres in diameter, making it very difficult to detect. Police also use the two different types in different ways. Radar can be used from a moving object, such as a police car, while a laser must be used from a stationary position. Laser is very difficult to detect and for that reason, often a detector will not alert you to any threats.

Fixed speed and red light cameras do not use laser or radar. They detect the speed of vehicles by using piezo electronic detectors embedded into the road surface. These piezo detectors deflect slightly when a vehicle is driven over the detectors, which then triggers an electronic device that accurately measures the speed of the vehicle. If the speed of the vehicle exceeds the legal limit then a digital picture is taken of the offending vehicle.

What to look for in a safety radar detector...

- Sensitivity – to get the best range and earliest warning, all bands should be as sensitive as possible. Around 60 per cent of police radars use the Ka band. This is the hardest band to detect, so when choosing a radar detector, exceptional Ka performance is the way to go
- Filtering – how effective the filtering is will directly correspond

with how effectively the radar will perform. With poor filtering, there is little point in having high sensitivity as it will frequently falsely alert, which could not only be annoying, but lead to the driver ignoring a genuine alert

- Easy to understand and audible alerts are essential. You will soon familiarise yourself with separate tones that are needed. Voice alerts are often an even better idea as they can be understood without any confusion or mistakes being made
- Mounting – a strong, quality mounting should be included with the produce so as not to cause any damage. As many radar detectors are only made for the US market, their displays are angled towards the left hand side. Make sure you can securely fasten the radar detector so it is easy to read from your driving position
- Selectable bands – as different areas rely on different bands – X or K for example – you need to be able to switch to the correct band for your positioning, otherwise you will end up with false alerts
- Safety Warning System – also referred to as a Driver Warning System, a radar detector with a Safety Warning System will alert drivers to dangers such as emergency vehicles in transit, rest area ahead and train approaching. As the use of SWS becomes more frequent, it's best to make sure your detector is equipped with this life saving technology
- Undetectable – radar detectors have been completely detectable or only undetectable by a couple of radar detector detectors, until recently. New technology has allowed certain radar detector to become undetectable to all RDDs, as recent test results have shown. The Beltronics new model – the BEL XR – has proven to be completely undetectable on police RDDs. As the saying goes, 'you get what you pay for', and this one may be top of the range, but it's quality design features means it's certainly worth shelling out that extra cash for

Strong support

The Australian Drivers Association has been supporting the implementation and use of the Safety Warning System on Western Australian roads since 2002. Users of SWS will be warned of a potential hazard up to one kilometre away. More than 70,000 drivers in WA now receive this warning through their safety radar detectors.

There are over 120 Safety Warning Systems being used in Western Australia. Since 2002, all new St John's Ambulance vehicles have been fitted with a transmitter warning of 'emergency vehicle ahead', plus some FESA vehicles, tow trucks, road crews and traffic management vehicles.

SWS transmitters have even been installed in WA accident blackspot areas, which warn of 'speed limit enforced' and in regional areas - 'rest area ahead'. Safety Warning Systems are currently in place to protect many of the state's 'at risk' workers. They have gained strong support from Unions, workers and Western Australian motorists and the Construction Forestry Mining



Energy Union has recommended SWS be utilised Australia-wide.

The Australian Driver's Association (ADRA) has carefully evaluated the effectiveness of the SWS utilising Driver Warning Systems. Research was carried out by Monash University into any adverse effects of the use of radar detectors around the world. The University's findings showed that there were no credible reports that proved radar detectors allowed drivers to speed or drivers with radar detectors had more accidents or that there was any negative impact on road safety. Available research actually supported the conclusion that drivers using a safety radar detector have fewer accidents, are more alert and more aware of the posted speed limit. Using a radar detector cannot be deemed as unsafe and there is no evidence or correlation between detector use and speeding or bad driver behaviour.

The banning of radar detectors in the Eastern States did not have any measurable impact on road safety, according to the Transport Safety Bureau.

In 1995, the federal courts in the USA overturned a ban on radar detectors, as they found no evidence to support the idea that radar detectors were a road safety hazard. The appeals court upheld the decision and radar detectors are still legal in the USA today. In 1998 the WA Independent Speed Management Task Force also concluded that there was no evidence to support a ban on radar detectors. ADRA undertook testing of radar detectors on WA roads and came to the same conclusion.

Advocate

One advocate of using SWS is Glenn Secco President of ADRA: "We use safety radars which are in common use in WA, to be a road hazard warning system inside their cars. As drivers have already paid to use this technology, they are more likely to respond to the safety warning they pick up.

"This flows on to the traffic behind these vehicles making it an effective and successful system. With a one kilometre warning, Ambulance and Emergency vehicles can get to an accident or emergency safer and more quickly. Drivers are also given a one kilometre warning that there is an accident ahead which could be around a corner or over a rise.

"There is no doubt, the safety warning system saves lives. We hope to introduce an inexpensive safety-warning receiver by 2009. SWS combined with the thousands of radar speed signalling devices on John Deere tractors, makes this one of the most extensive safety technology systems in the country.

"So we now utilise this widespread radar technology to make the roads safer in WA, all without fining or penalising drivers and without costing the government a cent." ●