

Know Your Limits: Why Vehicle Weights Are Catching Everyone Out

The Issue That's Impacting Every Industry

Across Canberra and the surrounding region, there's been a noticeable rise in vehicles operating beyond their legal limits, and not just in the freight sector. Civil contractors, landscapers, tradies, and council crews are all using light and medium rigid trucks, utes, and trailers daily. But when those vehicles are loaded with machinery, aggregates, or materials, they can quickly exceed Gross Vehicle Mass (GVM) or Gross Combination Mass (GCM) without anyone realising.

These aren't minor oversights, they're breaches under both Heavy Vehicle National Law (HVNL) and Work Health & Safety (WHS) legislation. In short, if your business owns, operates, or directs a vehicle, you share legal responsibility for ensuring it's being used within its rated limits.

It has been noted during inspections: "It's not just seeing large fleets making mistakes, seeing everyday works utes, tippers and trailers overloaded or misused because people don't understand how mass ratings actually work."

What We're Seeing in Training and on Canberra Roads

At Beck's, our trainers are noticing a consistent pattern in Verification of Competency (VoC) assessments and licence upgrades:

- Operators don't realise that towing a small excavator or skid steer may push their combination weight into the next licence class.
- Supervisors assume that if the vehicle looks safe, it's compliant, without checking data plates or trailer tags.
- Fleet vehicles and site tippers are often registered at one GVM but modified with toolboxes or cranes, which adds to the overall mass.
- Light rigid vehicles are commonly run close to (or above) their limit once fuel, water, and site gear are loaded.

These are simple oversights that carry big consequences.

Why GVM and GCM Matter More Than Ever

GVM (Gross Vehicle Mass) is the maximum legal weight of a vehicle, including its own weight, driver, passengers, fuel, and load.

GCM (Gross Combination Mass) is the maximum total weight of the vehicle plus any trailer it's towing.

These figures are not just manufacturer recommendations, they're enforceable legal limits. Operating above them can lead to:

- Licence breaches: driving outside the class held (for example, MR licence operating a combination requiring HR).
- Insurance refusal: if the vehicle exceeds its legal rating at the time of a crash.
- CoR liability: for managers or schedulers who directed or approved the use of that vehicle.
- Mechanical risk: reduced braking efficiency, tyre failure, or rollover risk, especially on hilly ACT routes.

Understanding these limits protects not just compliance, but your people, your reputation, and your contracts.

The Role of NHVR Inspectors

NHVR inspectors play a vital role in keeping Australia's roads safe by ensuring heavy and light commercial vehicles are compliant with mass, maintenance, and load restraint standards. Their job isn't only about enforcement, it's also about education and prevention.

When NHVR inspectors conduct roadside or site-based checks, they:

- Verify driver licences and vehicle registrations to ensure the right licence class is held for the vehicle or combination.
- Inspect GVM and GCM compliance, reviewing manufacturer data plates, trailers, and vehicle weights.
- Check load restraint and condition of securing equipment, especially on mixed or construction loads.
- Review pre-start, maintenance, and defect records as evidence of a company's CoR compliance.
- Identify and discuss safety risks with both drivers and managers, promoting corrective action rather than simply issuing penalties.

Inspectors have authority to issue improvement notices, defect clearances, or fines, but in the ACT and surrounding NSW regions, they're also focusing on educating businesses that may not identify as "transport operators." This includes civil contractors, trades, and councils whose vehicles often sit right on the compliance threshold. Their goal is to build a culture of accountability and awareness, not just enforcement, to prevent incidents before they occur.

What We're Doing at Beck's

We're helping local operators and businesses strengthen their compliance with practical, ACT-specific training and awareness tools. Our programs are built to close the knowledge gap around mass limits and everyday vehicle use:

- GVM & GCM Awareness Sessions – short, practical workshops for drivers and supervisors.
- Vehicle Combination Checks – confirming your vehicle and trailer pairings meet licence and manufacturer limits.
- Verification of Competency (VoC) – including real-world checks on load restraint, towing, and mass compliance.
- Toolbox Talks and Templates – pre-start sheets, checklists, and load restraint logs aligned with NHVR standards.
- Policy Support – helping businesses document their "reasonable steps" for CoR compliance.

If you operate in construction, landscaping, logistics, or local government, these sessions can make the difference between proactive compliance and reactive penalties.

Quick Tips for Operators and Managers

- ✓ Check compliance plates for both truck and trailer before use.
- ✓ Confirm towing weights and licence classes – don't assume.
- ✓ Keep all VoC, training, and maintenance records updated.
- ✓ Conduct and sign off pre-starts daily.
- ✓ Educate teams – not just drivers, but schedulers and supervisors.

In Summary, every industry that moves goods, machinery, or people shares a responsibility to understand vehicle mass and compliance. GVM and GCM awareness is no longer just a "transport" issue – it's a safety culture issue across all sectors of the ACT economy.

