NSW Road Noise Policy: key provisions

The NSW Road Noise Policy replaced Environmental Criteria for Road Traffic Noise (ECRTN) from 1 July 2011.

Emphasis on planning and noise source control to reduce noise

The NSW Road Noise Policy advocates:

- controlling noise emissions at their source
- avoiding noise through judicious land use planning, better road design and vehicle noise emission control
- in some circumstances and in certain locations, still using engineering measures such as noise barriers to mitigate noise impacts.

Scope of the NSW Road Noise Policy

The NSW Road Noise Policy identifies 'assessment criteria' and a 'relative increase criterion' for noise. These criteria aim to ensure there is an acceptable level of road traffic noise in NSW, and are used to assess:

- new road projects
- road redevelopment projects
- traffic-generating developments.

Differences between the NSW Road Noise Policy and ECRTN

There are certain differences between the NSW Road Noise Policy and the ECRTN.

Assessment criteria

- The ECRTN set different noise assessment criteria for freeways/arterial roads and collector roads (called 'sub-arterial roads' in the NSW Road Noise Policy). Section 2 of the NSW Road Noise Policy assigns the same daytime and night-time noise assessment criteria to sub-arterial roads as to freeways/arterial roads. This allows for an easy assessment of projects that manage all these types of roads. There is also a much reduced chance of incorrectly classifying a road category as it is only necessary to distinguish between local and non-local roads.
- One new assessment criterion has been introduced, namely, the relative increase criterion. This criterion aims to prevent significant increases in noise from road projects in quiet areas. Victoria and many states in the USA recommend additional action when significant increases in road traffic noise of 10–15 decibels are expected. This new criterion requires noise mitigation measures to be further considered when a road project would increase existing road traffic noise levels by 12 decibels, which is more

than a doubling of loudness in quiet areas. The NSW Road Noise Policy includes a detailed explanation of the new criterion and how to apply it.

- Assessment criteria for on-road and off-road bus transitways have been added to the NSW Road Noise Policy to protect existing residences.
- Noise measurement locations have been made clearer and are consolidated in a single table.
- The method of comparing 'do nothing' options and future traffic scenarios in environmental assessments has been clarified.
- The NSW Road Noise Policy acknowledges that in some cases the delineation between daytime (7 am–10 pm) and night-time (10 pm–7 a.m.) periods may vary from the standard hours, and that any such variations should be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.
- The process for deriving criteria in areas where there is a transition between road categories has been developed to provide for a smooth transition rather than a 'step change' in criteria at category boundaries.

Feasible and reasonable definitions

As with the ECRTN, the noise assessment criteria in the NSW Road Noise Policy are not mandatory. They are used during the environmental assessment of road proposals to trigger consideration of feasible and reasonable noise mitigation measures that seek to achieve the criteria. The definitions of 'feasible' and 'reasonable' have been revised to clarify the requirements for feasible mitigation and the factors to consider when selecting reasonable measures. These definitions are consistent with those in the NSW interim construction noise guideline.

Allowance criteria removed

The ECRTN allows noise assessment levels in existing areas of high traffic noise to increase by a half decibel for new roads or by two decibels for redeveloped roads. The allowances are occasionally incorrectly applied. The NSW Road Noise Policy removes these allowances for new and redeveloped roads so there can be greater certainty about the applicable noise criteria.

Rewording of mitigation and management sections

Guidance on noise mitigation and management has been consolidated and revised to provide concise suggestions on strategies for each situation the NSW Road Noise Policy addresses.

Noise Abatement Program

The NSW Road Noise Policy contains guidance on the Roads and Traffic Authority's Noise Abatement Program. Residents exposed to acute road noise where no road developments are proposed may be eligible for relief under this program.

Other road traffic noise issues

Additional sections have been added to the NSW Road Noise Policy to consolidate information and research on topics, including:

- habituation to noise – the research is inconclusive and annoyance may increase cumulatively in some situations

- sleep disturbance – the research results have been updated but are still largely inconclusive; the current screening criterion describing the emergence of noisy events above the steady-state level is retained
- health effects – short-term and long-term health effects are identified but it is difficult to accurately isolate and quantify effects from road traffic noise; preliminary results from the NSW Population Health Survey in relation to traffic noise are also discussed
- heavy vehicle engine brake noise – information on this issue has been updated to reflect proposed developments in the regulation of engine brakes urban planning – the NSW Road Noise Policy presents the results of research advocating access to quiet and green areas through judicious planning
- long-term strategies – the NSW Road Noise Policy identifies other strategies to reduce traffic noise impacts on the community over time.

Noise goals for new residential developments

As noise goals for new residential and other sensitive land uses near busy roads are specified in State Environmental Planning Policy (Infrastructure) 2007, they are not dealt with in the NSW Road Noise Policy. Developers can find advice on how to meet these goals by consulting Development near rail corridors and busy roads – interim guideline