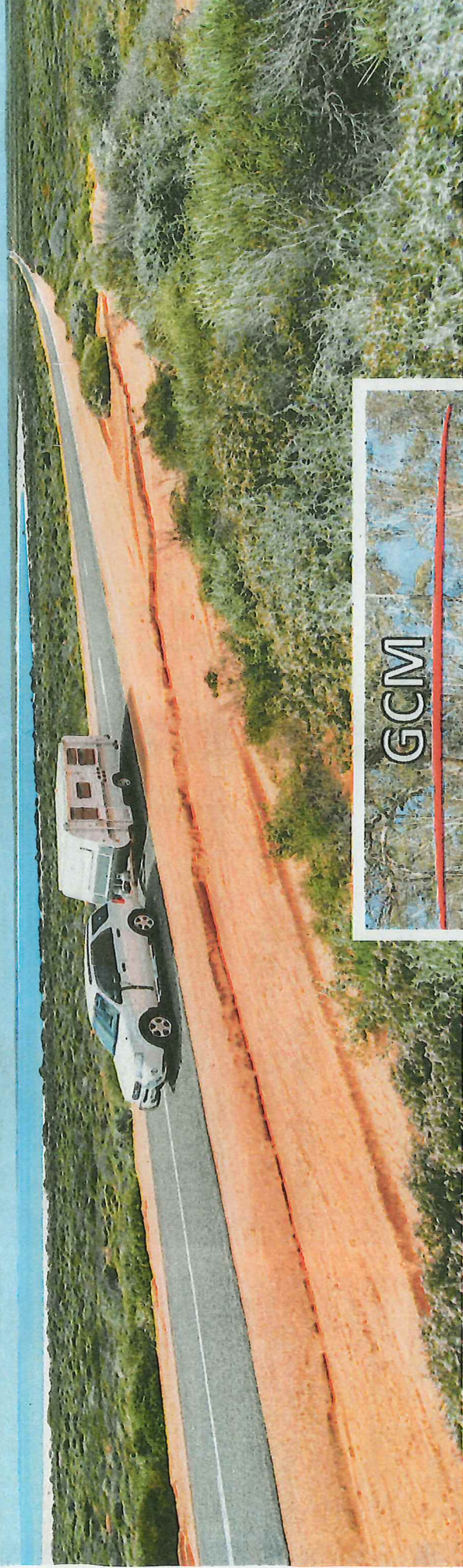


Upgrade to safety smarts

Four-wheel-drive owners who upgrade their vehicles may find themselves unable to legally tow their caravan or boat due to WA's GCM legislation



OLGA DE MOELLER

Some off-roading enthusiasts and aftermarket accessory fitters have accused the State Government of doing a “backflip” on legislation which reduces their ability to modify their vehicles, but the Department of Transport says it is merely adhering to national guidelines.

The issue revolves around gross combined mass, which is the total permissible weight a vehicle plus the trailer/caravan being towed can be, according to the vehicle's original manufacturer.

Many outdoor enthusiasts and companies modify their vehicles to enhance their capabilities above and beyond how they leave the factory.

Aftermarket accessory fitter Lovells says modifications are required because new vehicles aim to please a lot of different buyers, at the cheapest possible price.

This means they may not be anywhere near capable of performing a particular task. Lovells says it does stringent safety tests on all its wares and claims it meets the criteria of a manufacturer under the Australian Design Rules because it accepts responsibility for compliance to the ADRs and gets a compliance plate approval certificate for the vehicles it upgrades.

However, in response to a 2018 Federal Government review of GCM and tow capacity for new vehicles modified by second-stage manufacturers such as Lovells, WA now bans four-wheel-drive owners increasing their vehicle's GCM beyond what the vehicle's original manufacturer specifies.

This means a modified vehicle may not be legally able to tow the family caravan

or boat, despite its upgrades. Increasing the GCM of a vehicle can affect the drivetrain, engine, cooling system, chassis and handling characteristics, so you need to consider your warranty.

The Department of Transport says it has “serious” safety concerns about GCM revisions given there is no nationally recognised testing standard in place.

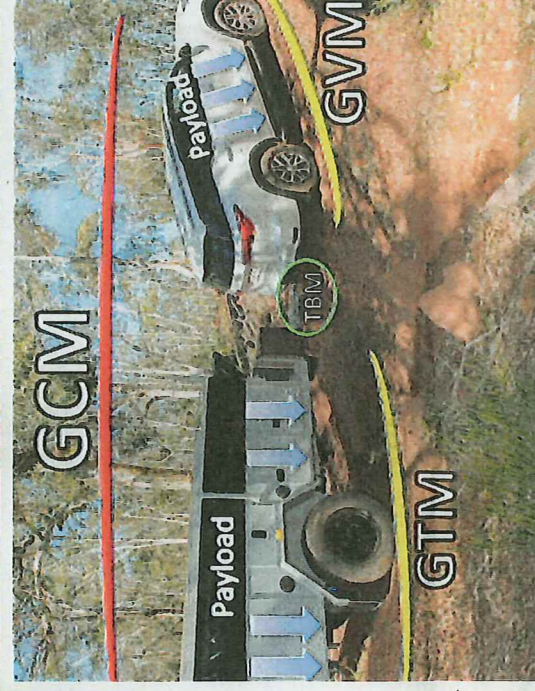
The 2018 review came after some aftermarket suspension manufacturers offering gross vehicle mass upgrades had misgivings about vehicle safety, durability and liability issues when operating above original ratings.

Adding to the confusion, upgrading a car's gross vehicle mass — its total weight, not including anything it is towing — is legal in WA, if it adheres to Federal regulations.

However, the accepted GCM still does not change as there are no Federal regulations for re-rating GCM in light vehicles — generally up to 4.5 tonnes.

Some companies, like Lovells, have approvals for specific modifications to specific vehicles allowing a gross vehicle mass upgrade concurrently with a braked towing capacity upgrade — but again, this does not produce a new, legally recognised GCM in WA.

Additionally, WA road traffic regulations prohibit increasing



a vehicle's towing capacity — and a suspension modifier does not count.

The Australian Automotive Aftermarket Association's director of government relations and advocacy Lesley Yates said GCM was treated differently in every State.

Ms Yates said talks were under way to create a Federal standard for GCM modifications.

“Our position is that GCM requires a test protocol and we have drafted this protocol for our current dialogue with all State governments,” she said. “We would say that since a gross vehicle mass upgrade has a test protocol, a GCM upgrade requires its own protocol.”

The DoT points out there could be a problem if a vehicle to be licensed in WA had a tow capacity or GCM upgrade certified in another State or Territory because this would be subject to WA's regulated mass and loading requirements, an on-road issue falling under Main Roads and the WA Police.

Lovells national sales manager Dragan Vasic said a lot of grey nomads from WA re-registered their vehicle in other States, such as South Australia, Victoria or NSW and had the work done there to get around the law. “As they tend to travel a lot and may have multiple houses or family around the country, it doesn't make much difference to them where their vehicle is plated,” he said.

BUSTING THE JARGON

Acronyms doing your head in? Us too:

Kerb weight: The mass of the vehicle, brand new, with no passengers or luggage, but with all fluid reservoirs filled to capacity and with all standard equipment fitted, but without any accessories. So, if your vehicle weighs in at 2000kg and your gross vehicle mass is 3200kg, then you've got 1200kg of load up your sleeve.

Tare weight: Essentially the same as kerb weight, but with only 10 litres of fuel — considered the minimum to get the vehicle to the weighbridge.

Gross vehicle mass (GVM): The maximum your vehicle can weigh as specified by the manufacturer. You'll usually find this on the plaque in the driver's door well, or in your owner's manual. It includes everything from fuel to the kitchen sink, toys, bull bar, tools, radio system, fridge, fishing gear and luggage.

Gross combined mass (GCM): The total permissible combined weight of the vehicle and trailer/caravan being towed, including occupants, fuel and cargo. It's generally found in the owner's manual in vehicles under 4.5 tonnes.

Payload: The difference between gross vehicle mass and kerb weight. It's the legal amount a car can carry. It's usually associated with commercial vehicles but applies to passenger cars as well.

Gross trailer mass (GTM): The maximum your trailer can weigh fully laden with any gear, water, gas bottles and annex when it's hooked up to your vehicle. This will be specified by the trailer manufacturer.

Towing capacity: The maximum a vehicle can tow as specified by the manufacturer. It's usually listed as two separate figures for trailers with and without their own braking system.

Tow bar rating: How much your tow bar can handle. If your vehicle is rated to tow 3000kg but your tow bar is only rated 2500kg, then you should go by the lower number. Remember, the tow bar and ball you've fitted is counted in the gross vehicle mass, not your towing capacity.

Tow ball mass: How much weight can be put on the actual hitch. Generally, it is 10 per cent of a vehicle's maximum tow rating.

Staying legal for the vehicles stated GCM for towing requires careful thought and planning. Picture: GBTW

Many outdoor enthusiasts modify their vehicles to enhance their capabilities above and beyond how they leave the factory.



You don't want to have to leave your van behind.

Picture: Onfokus