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Tunnel vision as Scully reverses

By Stephanie Peatling, Environment Reporter
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Air filtration technology will be trialled in Sydney's busiest road tunnels, the Minister for Roads, Carl Scully, announced yesterday.

Mr Scully had previously dismissed the need to install the systems. They were little more than a "high-tech placebo that makes people feel good", he had said.

But, after sustained community pressure and a visit by a Roads and Traffic Authority delegation to Japan, Mr Scully said he was convinced air quality could be improved through filtration.

An international tender will be called for electrostatic precipitators (ESPs) and technology targeting nitrogen dioxide to be fitted in tunnels such as the M5 East, the Cross City Tunnel and Lane Cove Tunnel.

The technology would also be installed in the proposed M4 East tunnel. No tunnels in Australia are fitted with ESPs.

"The decision to pilot filtration technology in Sydney does not mean the practice of building tunnels in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth without filtration has been wrong," Mr Scully said.

"The visit to Japan confirmed that in many respects there are tougher planning and environmental controls on our tunnels in Sydney than in other parts of the world."

Mr Scully had previously said the technology was not yet advanced enough to be worth the expenditure.

Parliamentary inquiries in 1999, 2001 and 2002 had each recommended that tunnels should be installed with the technology.

A NSW Health report last year recommended motorcyclists and people in convertible cars avoid the M5 East tunnel during traffic hold-ups. The report urged drivers to wind up windows and switch air-conditioning to recirculate while driving through the tunnel, which is ventilated by a single exhaust stack.

Mr Scully could not say yesterday how much the trial would cost. He conceded it would be cheaper to trial it in the proposed M4 East extensions than to fit it in existing

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tunnels.

"It will be a lot easier to install tunnel filtration when it is incorporated from the very earliest design stages, even before an environmental impact statement is displayed or a tender process has commenced," he said.

The Opposition's roads spokesman, Don Page, said the announcement was a "huge backflip".

"This is another demonstration of Carl Scully refusing to be proactive on important issues," Mr Page said.

"It will cost NSW taxpayers tens of millions of dollars because it costs a lot more to retrofit tunnels like the M5 proper filtration systems than it does to build them as you go."

The group which has long been campaigning for filtration technology, Residents Against Polluting Stacks, cautiously welcomed Mr Scully's announcement.

"It has taken five long years to get to this point, with the RTA at every step stubbornly denying the health risks and the existence of proven solutions," its president, Charles Briers, said.

He called it "a long-awaited win for common sense".



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