



The oldest ISXe5 in the RTA Mt Isa fleet powers this C509 Kenworth.

RISING STAR

The vision of roadtrains punching through the great emptiness, plumes of dust marking their progress, will forever remain a trademark of Road Trains of Australia (RTA).

Australia's largest cattle carrier, RTA is a legendary brand, thanks in no small way to its founder Noel Buntine, a pioneer of roadtrain cattle operations in the Top End.

Buntine Roadways had its origins in the 1950s, an iconic business that Noel Buntine sold to a NSW company in 1981. However, the business didn't succeed and within two years had been placed in receivership. Buntine bought the business back from the receivers and renamed it Road Trains of Australia.

From 1985, when Buntine sold RTA to get out of roadtrains for good, there were several owners until another respected operator in the Top End, Jim Cooper of Gulf Transport, took control in the mid-90s. The Cooper family ran the business with success through to 2006 at which point they sold RTA to Dave and Bart Jones.

Western Stars join RTA fleet.

Today, RTA runs more than 80 roadtrain triples across the top half of Australia with Kenworth, Mack and Western Star prime movers spearheading the operations.

The latest additions to the RTA fleet are 10 Western Star 6900s, all powered by Cummins ISXe5 engines rated at 600 hp with peak torque of 1850 lb ft.

We meet up with Mike Bailey at Mt Isa, where three of the Western Stars are based. An icon of the cattle haulage industry, Bailey is Queensland manager for RTA. The road transport school of hard knocks obviously carved deep into the Bailey persona from when he first climbed behind the wheel of a truck at the age of 14.

Born in Isisford, an outback town in central western Queensland, Bailey learned some hard lessons in his younger days when getting ahead often meant getting away with as much as possible. It was eventually in roadtrains that he found the platform to satisfy ambition.

Today, with a calm persistence, he runs 28 triples today out of Mt Isa, Longreach and Quilpie, hauling cattle for stations such as Alexandria, Newcastle Waters, Headingley, Anthony Lagoon, Brunette Downs, Rockhampton Downs and Avon Downs.

ISXe5 reliable, running cooler.

The reliability of the ISXe5 is proving a plus for Mike Bailey. "We don't have the drama of chasing them around the country," he says. "The ISXe5 also runs a lot cooler than the EGR engines we had previously which is important in the kind of temperatures we're operating in."

Indeed, heat is an enemy, sometimes a ferocious one, leaving no one in doubt about the country's ability to melt the life out of almost anything.

A talking point at RTA's Mt Isa depot is the fact the ISXe5 is using significantly less AdBlue than competitor engines in the fleet – around 4% less, in fact. When you consider the diesel throughput of a triple roadtrain – typically 1 km/litre – the savings are considerable.

The ISXe5 engines are actually achieving fuel consumption of up to 1.1 km/litre. This equates to potential seasonal saving per engine of up to 50,000 litres of diesel compared with the EGR engines previously operated by RTA. "With our EGR engines we were typically looking at around 800 metres/litre," Mike Bailey points out.

The significantly reduced fan-on time with the cooler running ISXe5 is obviously a key factor behind the improved fuel figure. Commanding driver respect.

Geoff Brown pilots the oldest ISXe5 in the RTA Mt Isa fleet.

Powering a C509 Kenworth, the 15-litre Cummins which was just over two years old in September and had clocked up 320,000 km and 5,500 hours.

"From one service to the next the Cummins isn't using a drop of oil," he says. The performance of the ISXe5 also commands respect from Geoff. "In a good wind, it will hold 90 all day on the cruise control with loaded triples, outperforming previous engines I've driven," he says.

"I started driving at 18 and I'm 59 now... this is the best truck I've ever driven."

Robert Staak is driving one of the 6900 Western Stars and he's also enthused about the pulling power of the ISXe5, especially in the wind. He likes the Western Star which had clocked up close to 100,000 km when we meet up in Mt Isa. One of its best features, he says, is its directional stability with the twin steering box set-up on the 9.0-tonne rated front axle. The big 1730 mm (68 in) 'Stratosphere' sleeper is another plus.

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Few modifications to Stars.

Although it's early days for the Western Stars – the first units entered service in mid-2015 – Mike Bailey likes what he has seen to date. Driver feedback is positive about cab comfort, steering and ride (Neway air suspension is fitted at the rear), and few modifications have been needed to meet the rigors of cattle haulage.

Mike Bailey's company vehicle these days is a Dodge Ram pickup truck propelled by the 6.7-litre Cummins ISB engine. "It's got 800 lb ft of torque... we used to pull three trailers with 237 horsepower Macks that had 900 lb ft," he laughs. Just a reminder that today's roadtrain drivers, with 600 hp and 2050 lb ft of torque on tap, couldn't help but humbly admire their predecessors in the cattle haulage business! ■