Driverless car industry worth ‘hundreds of billions’ to Australia

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SA News

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AUSTRALIA is well-positioned to become a global hub in the emerging multibillion-dollar driverless car industry, according to a US expert visiting Adelaide.

Raj Rajkumar, who is a professor in the electrical and computer engineering at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Mellon University, said Australia “could be a very good test bed for testing and deploying technology” because of our vast distances, long roads and relatively small population.

“If the technology is developed locally, it makes all the more sense for these car makers to assemble and manufacture these cars in Australia,” he said, before arriving in Adelaide to speak at this week’s International Driverless Cars Conference.
Prof Rajkumar has been working with General Motors in the US for more than a decade on the development of an automated car and predicted it will one day be a market worth many billions of dollars.

“About 80 million cars are sold globally every year,’’ he said.

Toyota's driverless car

“Even if 10 per cent of these cars are automated in the next 15 years, you are talking literally hundreds of billions of dollars. That is why there is an arms race going on between companies and countries.”

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Most of the world’s large car makers, including GM, Toyota and Honda, are already investing significant resources into developing driverless cars. Technology companies such as Google and Uber are also investing.

Electric carmaker Tesla this month released a car with an “autopilot” function, which allows the car to change lanes by itself.

Locally, technology company Codha is this week releasing its V2X radar system, which acts as a sensor for driverless cars, no matter the weather. This weekend, South Australia will become the first place in the
southern hemisphere to trial driverless car on ordinary roads, using the Southern Expressway for the experiment.

Professor Raj Rajkumar

Prof Rajkumar said that while fully automated driverless cars were probably still 10-15 years away, within a “generation, a generation and a half” it would be the norm.

“I think I can see one day when all vehicles will be automated and humans will not be expected to be part of the process because humans by their very nature tend to be error-prone, therefore they will be a hazard to themselves and others on the road,” he said.

Prof Rajkumar said trust in technology helped people adapt to the initially unsettling experience of the car being controlled by computer.

“Initially people tend to be very nervous, the hands are right next to the steering wheel, the feet are right next to the brake pedal,” he said.

“Then a few minutes go by and the vehicle does the right thing, it slows down for the vehicle in front of you, the vehicle starts at a traffic light correctly, it knows when the lights are changing.

“After a while they gain confidence — in a matter of 10 minutes they basically withdraw their hands, take their feet off and relax.”