

NEWS

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Contact: Doug Callaway
850.521.1256
Frank Moretti
202.262.0714

National Study: Florida's Rural Roads Among America's Deadliest *TRIP finds Florida second in highway fatality rate; third in fatalities*

WASHINGTON – Florida's rural roads are among the nation's most dangerous. That's the grim distinction bestowed in a national study released Thursday by TRIP, a national nonprofit transportation research group.

According to TRIP, Florida averaged 3.70 fatalities on rural, non-Interstate roads for every 100 million vehicle miles traveled in 2003, a rate second only to Arizona. An average of 1,242 people died annually on Florida's rural, non-Interstate roads and highways between 1999 and 2003. Only Texas and California had more average fatalities per year during that period.

"These numbers are dramatic and a symptom of a much larger problem in Florida," said Doug Callaway, president of Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT), a statewide transportation advocacy organization. "Florida's unmet road funding needs amount to a \$23 billion 'pothole' that will need to be fixed – or we will see the situation continue to get worse."

In Florida, 41 percent of traffic fatalities between 1999 and 2003 have occurred on rural, non-Interstate roads and highways, even though vehicle travel on these roads accounted for only 19 percent of vehicle travel during that period.

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TRIP's study, "Growing Traffic in Rural America: Safety, Mobility and Economic Challenges in America's Heartland," found that there has been an average of 22,127 traffic fatalities annually on the nation's rural, non-Interstate roads between 1999 and 2003; during the same period, there was an average of 42,301 people killed each year in traffic accidents in the U.S.

"It is critical that we improve safety on the nation's rural roads, which are exposing rural residents and visitors to an unacceptable level of risk," said William M. Wilkins, TRIP's executive director. "We know how to make rural roads safer. What is missing is adequate funding for road safety projects that will save numerous lives."

The TRIP report found that the five states with highest rate of traffic fatalities on rural, non-Interstate roads per 100 million miles of travel between 1999 and 2003 are: Arizona, Florida, South Carolina, Montana and Kentucky. The five states with the largest number of rural, non-Interstate traffic deaths between 1999 and 2003 are: Texas, California, Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania.

"America's rural roads are critical links in the nation's transportation system, providing farm-to-market transportation and serving as drivers of economic growth in the Heartland," said Charles Stamp, Chairman of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers (AEM), and Vice President Public Affairs Worldwide, Deere & Company. "These roads are the primary routes of travel and commerce for the approximately 60 million people living in rural America."

Additional findings of the study include:

- The traffic fatality rate on non-Interstate rural roads in 2003 was 2.72 deaths for every 100 million vehicle-miles of travel, compared to a traffic fatality rate on all other roads in 2003 of 0.99 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles of travel.
- Between 1990 and 2002, vehicle travel on rural roads increased by 27 percent and commercial truck travel on rural roads increased by 32 percent.
- Approximately 60 million people live in rural communities, approximately 21 percent of the nation's population. The nation's rural population has increased by 11 percent since 1990.

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- Growth in rural areas, particularly in the South and West, has been fueled by significant domestic and international migration to regions that offer affordable housing, small-town quality of life, but yet are within commuting distance of larger metropolitan areas.
- Rural roads are more likely than urban roads to have two-lanes, and to have poor roadway design, including narrow lanes, limited shoulders, sharp curves, exposed hazards, pavement drop-offs, steep slopes and limited clear zones along roadsides.
- Motorists on rural, non-Interstate routes are six-and-a-half times more likely to be killed while attempting to negotiate than motorists driving on all other roads.
- Motorists on rural, non-Interstate routes are approximately four times as likely to be involved in a fatal collision between vehicles going in the opposite direction than motorists traveling on all other routes. Yet only three percent of traffic fatalities on rural non-Interstate routes from 1999 to 2003 were the result of one vehicle trying to pass another vehicle.
- Most head-on crashes on rural, non-Interstate roads are likely caused by a motorist making an unintentional maneuver as a result of driver fatigue, being distracted or driving too fast in a curve.
- Recommended safety improvements include rumble strips, centerline rumble strips, improving signage and pavement/lane markings, installing lighting, removing or shielding roadside obstacles and improving or adding guardrails, adding turn lanes at intersections, resurfacing pavements and adding median barriers, improving roadway alignment, reducing the angle of curves, widening lanes, adding or paving shoulders and adding intermittent passing lanes or adding a third or fourth lane.
- Numerous states are becoming more aggressive in addressing rural road safety issues, taking steps to reduce the rate of rural road traffic fatalities including, identifying high-risk locations, improving roadway design in reconstruction projects, and installing roadway safety features.
- Congress is currently working on reauthorizing a new long-term federal surface transportation program, which may increase funding available for rural road safety improvements. The current federal surface transportation program expires on May 31, 2005.
- The nation's food distribution system is becoming increasingly reliant on truck travel to move agricultural products, including grains, wheat, corn and fruits and vegetables. The reliance on trucking for goods movement by the agricultural sector is expected to increase.