



2010 Utah highway fatalities continue downward trend

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At A Glance

By the numbers

- Highest number of fatalities since 1947:
 - 1978 » 386
 - 1972 » 382
- Lowest number of fatalities since 1947:
 - 1949 » 174
 - 1947 » 186
- Number of fatalities during the past two years:
 - 2010 » 235
 - 2009 » 244

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BY JASON BERGREEN
 The Salt Lake Tribune

First published Jan 12 2011 01:01AM
 Updated Jan 12, 2011 09:38AM

Joann Twitchell died near Enterprise when her SUV collided with a truck on New Year's Day. Diana Berg, of Holladay, died three days later, when her car jumped an overpass on Interstate 215 in Salt Lake County. And Gillian Dickensen's car overturned last weekend on Interstate 15, killing her.

Highway fatalities began 2011 the same way they ended in 2010 — with too many, said Robert Hull, Utah Department of Transportation traffic and safety engineer.

But despite the higher number of fatalities during January and the last three months of 2010, fewer people were killed in car crashes on Utah highways for a third straight year.

Preliminary numbers released by UDOT indicate that 235 people died in 2010. That is down from 244 and 276, respectively, in the two previous years.

Hull said Tuesday that he is encouraged by the trend. The number of deaths last year is the lowest the state has seen since 228 were killed in 1974. That number, 36 years ago, was itself unusually low — there were 361 deaths in 1973 and 274 in 1975.

In fact, Utah's roads have gotten safer nearly every year when factors such as population and number of miles driven is taken into account. Last year was the first since 1947 — the first year for which the state has statistics — that the death rate fell below one (0.93) per 100 million vehicle miles driven in Utah. The highest rate was 9.36 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles driven in 1948.

But Hull is still concerned about the 67 deaths between October and December in 2010. That is a 52 percent increase compared with the same months in 2009.

Statistically, there are more fatal crashes in Utah during the summer because there are more cars on the road, Hull said. Snow and icy roads during the winter tend to force drivers to slow down, decreasing the potential for a fatal crash.

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"There isn't really anything we can point to" accounting for the increase, Hull said.

Since 2006, the Zero Fatalities campaign, sponsored by UDOT and the Department of Public Safety, has sought to educate the public about safe and unsafe driving habits. It lists the top five behaviors that contribute to Utah highway fatalities as drowsiness, distractions, aggressive and impaired driving, and not wearing a seat belt.

Though about nine out of 10 people in Utah wore a seat belt while driving or

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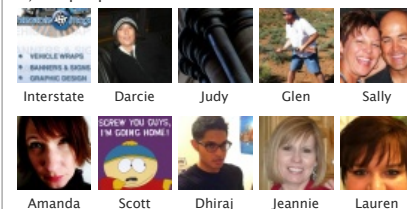
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sitting in the front seat last year, a number that has remained consistent since 2008, about 40 percent of those killed weren't buckled up or were improperly restrained, the report said.

"That's still one of the most significant issues we're seeing out there," Hull said.

Also, to help tackle the high number of fatalities that have occurred when vehicles run off the side of the highway, UDOT has, in recent years, been installing cable barriers and rumble strips.

In 2010, 132 vehicles left the highway during a fatal crash, which is slightly less than in the previous three years.

Zero Fatalities also looks at other reasons for fatal crashes. There were three train-related deaths reported in 2010, after none were reported in 2008 and 2009 and one in 2007.

There also were three fatal crashes caused by, or involving, wild animals and one involving a domestic animal in 2010.

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