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Utah road fatalities fall by 29 in '08

'Carelessness' » 110 people who died weren't wearing seat belts.

By Jason Bergreen
The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 01/14/2009 10:08:23 AM MST

John Njord, the executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation, is pleased Utah road fatalities in 2008 are down from the previous year. What he can't understand is why 88 percent, and not 100 percent, of motorists buckle their seat belts every time they get in a car.

Standing in a large, white UDOT maintenance shed Tuesday afternoon, Njord asked, "Who are those 12 percent who get in their cars and don't buckle up?"

Njord, speaking at UDOT's annual Zero Fatalities press conference, said 270 people died on state roads and highways in 2008. That's 29 less than in 2007. But that's "still too high," he said.

The 270 fatalities announced Tuesday are from a preliminary tally and do not include Taylorsville crossing guard Jim Smith, who was struck by a car on Dec. 16, 2007, and died two weeks later, said UDOT crash-studies engineer Scott Jones.

Njord and Utah Highway Patrol Col. Lance Davenport stressed that seat belts save lives. Njord said 110 people who died in car crashes in 2008 were not wearing seat belts.

"It's just simply carelessness," he said.

During his speech, Njord stood behind a podium next to several signs quoting responses drivers had given UHP troopers in December when they were asked about not wearing a seat belt.

"It wrinkles my clothes," stated one. "I'm all bundled up and I didn't want to put it on," another stated.

Njord said he is looking forward to 2009 as "a year of no excuses for not wearing seat belts."

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