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Gov. Gregoire announces Washington traffic deaths continue to decline

OLYMPIA - Gov. Chris Gregoire today announced that traffic deaths in Washington dropped significantly in 2008. Preliminary figures indicate that 518 people died in traffic accidents last year, compared to 568 in 2007, representing approximately a nine percent decline in deaths.

This is the third consecutive year with a decline in traffic fatalities. Since 1980, the annual fatality rates per 100 million vehicle miles traveled in Washington consistently have been below the national average and closely follow a national downward trend.

“Washington State Patrol and the Department of Transportation are saving lives. This is terrific news,” Gregoire said. “Together with Washington State Patrol Chief John Batiste, Transportation Secretary Paula Hammond and other safety experts, we developed a long-range plan to save lives on our area roadways, and that plan is working. These numbers reflect our excellent progress toward the goal of having zero traffic fatalities by the year 2030.”

Target Zero, Washington’s strategic highway safety plan, is a team approach built with the following components:

- **Engineering:** The Washington State Department of Transportation builds and maintains roads with no higher priority than safety. Automobile manufacturers are engineering vehicles with much-improved occupant protection systems.
- **Enforcement:** The Washington State Patrol targets enforcement efforts on violations known to cause the most deaths — driving under the influence, speeding and failure to wear seat belts.
- **Education:** The Washington Department of Licensing is continually working to improve the quality of and increase participation in driver training schools, motorcycle safety training classes and commercial driver training schools.

- Emergency medical services: Advances in medicine mean that paramedics and emergency room doctors are able to save people who a few years ago would have died from their injuries.

“Perhaps the most important members of the team striving to reduce vehicle fatalities are drivers themselves,” Gregoire said. “Drivers who are focused on the road, driving at reasonable speeds and buckled up save lives.”

Drivers travelled fewer miles in 2008, possibly due to increases in gas prices. While this might account for some reduction in deaths, it does not solely explain the large drop. Target Zero initiatives are believed to have the greater effect, particularly on roads targeted for enhanced enforcement or engineering improvements.

Gregoire noted that highway improvements play a key role in safety. For instance, there has been a 62 percent reduction in serious injury and fatal collisions in highway medians since the installation of cable median barriers.

“Over the past six years, the Department of Transportation has leveraged the investments of the 2003 and 2005 gas tax packages to build projects that are providing real safety improvements,” Hammond said. “Safety measures such as cable median barriers, centerline rumble strips and intersection improvements are helping to save lives.”

Unfortunately, motorcycle deaths rose in 2008, from 66 in 2007 to 76. In most fatalities, the motorcycle rider was at fault.

“We will be cracking down,” said Batiste, a former motorcycle officer. “I understand the joy of riding, but these folks need to slow down. We will be offering them around 400 good reasons to do so.”

Batiste was referring to fines for speeding, which range up to \$411.

The preliminary 2008 numbers will not be final until Dec. 31, 2009. Changes can occur because of delayed deaths or delayed reporting. However, the number typically does not change significantly.

Traffic Fatalities in Washington State

Year	Total Fatalities	Motorcycle Fatalities
2008	518 (Preliminary)	75 (Preliminary)
2007	568	66
2006	633	80
2005	651	74