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Colorado Traffic Deaths Drop to Lowest Level in Three Decades

DENVER – The number of people killed in motor vehicle crashes in Colorado in 2009 may have reached the lowest level in three decades, according to preliminary data released today by the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT). In 2009, 464 people were killed in traffic crashes in Colorado, a 15 percent decline from 2008 when 548 people died on Colorado roadways. Last year marked the first time fatalities dropped below 500 since 1988 when 497 people were killed. Colorado has experienced a steady decline in motor vehicle fatalities since a recent peak of 743 deaths in 2002, despite an increase of nearly 4,200 million vehicle miles traveled in 2008 compared to 2002.

“It’s difficult to call it ‘good news’ when so many people still died last year on Colorado roadways, but the progress the state has made in saving lives is truly encouraging,” said Governor Bill Ritter. “Collaboration and partnerships across the state have resulted in incredible advances in public education, enforcement, engineering and emergency services in Colorado. Our challenge will be to continue this positive trend into the new decade, but it can’t be done without more people wearing seat belts and driving sober.”

Information on restraint use and alcohol-related crashes is not yet available for 2009. In 2008, 40 percent of all traffic fatalities were alcohol-related, 33 percent of vehicle occupants killed were not wearing seat belts, and 18 percent of fatalities were motorcyclists.

“High-visibility enforcement campaigns such as the ‘Heat Is On’ and ‘Click It or Ticket’ have helped remind people of the consequences of breaking the law and the tragic outcome when lives are lost needlessly,” said Col. James Wolfenbarger, chief of the Colorado State Patrol. “The Colorado State Patrol and law enforcement agencies across the state have been sending a clear

message that dangerous behaviors like aggressive driving, speeding and drunk driving are not acceptable. And buckling up is the single most important thing you can do increase your odds of surviving a crash.”

In 2009 the Colorado State Patrol experienced a 12 percent reduction in fatal crashes on roads patrolled by state troopers translating to 41 fewer persons killed or lives saved. This comes on the heels of a nearly 35 percent reduction in fatalities from 2001 to 2008 on roads under the jurisdictional authority of the State Patrol and has led to the lowest number of traffic deaths investigated by troopers in a decade.

“Education has been a huge factor in saving lives, but there have also been great advances in engineering that have made our roadways safer,” said Pamela Hutton, CDOT’s Chief Engineer and Director of the Office of Transportation Safety. “Everything from the installation of rumble strips and cable medians to targeted safety improvements on roadways identified as high accident locations have prevented crashes or significantly increased the chances of surviving if one occurs.”

The passage of traffic safety legislation has also played a role in reducing fatalities. For example, Colorado’s Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) laws, which set limits and requirements on new teen drivers, are credited with helping reduce by half the number of young people age 15 to 20 killed in crashes each year.

Safety experts are exploring ways that current laws can be strengthened to save additional lives, including increasing the required age for booster seats, expanding GDL laws, and passing a primary seat belt law in Colorado. Currently, adult drivers can be ticketed for violating the seat belt law only if they are stopped for another traffic violation first.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), states with primary seat belt laws have an average seat belt use rate that is 13 percent higher than secondary enforcement states. Colorado’s current seat belt use rate is 81.1 percent, below the national average of 84 percent. According to NHTSA, if Colorado increased its seat belt use to 90 percent, an additional 32 lives would be saved each year and the state would also save \$111 million annually.

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