

## Driver Beware: Rural Roads Are Deadliest

Traveling over the river and through the woods this holiday season is not the safest way to get to Grandmother's house. The roads traveled least are the nation's deadliest roads, according to federal highway data. More Americans die on rural highways than on urban streets and freeways.

Last year, 56 percent of the nation's 37,261 traffic fatalities occurred in rural areas. Yet rural America has just 23 percent of the nation's population. In some states, more than 90 percent of highway deaths occur on rural roads.

The grim statistics provided by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also show that drivers on rural roads die at a rate 2.5 times higher per mile traveled than on urban highways. Urban drivers travel twice as many miles but suffer close to half the fatal accidents.

This may seem counterintuitive, but highway safety officials and activists have plenty of explanations. People driving rural roads tend to drive faster. They drive without seat belts at higher rates. More of them drive and die drunk. When they're injured in accidents, they may not get timely emergency medical care given the remoteness of many rural roads. And, deer, elk, moose and other wild animals are more likely to dart out into traffic on rural roads.

Some experts note that the outdated design and layout of many rural highways are also factors. Driving errors that are manageable on urban roads become deadly on rural highways.

Victor Mendez, administrator of the Federal Highway Administration, notes that there is little room to recover if a driver makes a mistake on a rural highway.

"That's simply because of the nature of rural highways," Mendez says. "The lanes are much more narrow. You look at trees and ditches. Chances are they're closer to the roadway than they would be on an interstate."

There may be no better example of the risks on rural roads than the 120-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 6 between Spanish Fork and Green River in Utah.

### A Most Dangerous Rural Road

The carnage on U.S. 6 earned it the dubious distinction of being one of the most dangerous highways in America. At least, that's what Reader's Digest and the BBC declared 10 years ago. Since 1996, more than 150 people have died in more than 500 serious accidents on that central Utah portion of the road.

"I would think that there is not anybody in the community that doesn't know someone fairly closely that has been killed on Highway 6," says Brad King, a vice president of the College of Eastern Utah in Price, a small city of about 15,000 people at the center of the deadly stretch of highway.

King represented the area in the Utah Legislature for a dozen years and can name 10 students, friends and neighbors who died in Highway 6 crashes.

"I can't remember a time when you didn't worry about it," King says. "Parents, when they send their kids away for college, that's one of the big concerns. 'Do I send them north so they travel Highway 6? Or, do we go south where it's not so dangerous?' "

Avoiding Highway 6 is difficult because it's the direct link to medical specialists, government offices, shopping, colleges and family along Utah's populous Wasatch Front, which includes Salt Lake City. Truckers use the road because it's the shortest route between Salt Lake City and Denver, linking Interstates 15 and 70 — two of the West's busiest trade corridors. And tourists drive the route because it leads to the national parks, wild rivers and red rock canyons of southeastern Utah. More than 6,000 vehicles make the trip every day. That's more traffic than travels on most of Interstate 70 in Utah.

The result is a mix of freeway-type traffic, including double tractor-trailers and tanker trucks, passenger cars and recreational vehicles, all blazing along at freeway speeds on a mountain and canyon roadway that sometimes twists and curves and constricts down to two narrow lanes. Deer and elk cross the road, and snow and ice make it slick.

Ten years ago, most of Highway 6 had just two lanes with narrow shoulders and no dividers. Even now, after some improvements, some sections have only an 18-inch-wide double yellow line that separates massive tractor-trailers and tiny sedans as they barrel toward each other. Many fatal crashes are caused by impatient drivers trying to pass slow-moving vehicles and crossing into oncoming traffic.

#### 'Your Message Has Been Heard'

The danger and the deaths on Highway 6 galvanized people in Price and surrounding communities. In 2002, some confronted then-Gov. Mike Leavitt at a town hall meeting in Castle Dale, Utah.

Insurance agent Mark Justice pleaded with the governor. "We're as valuable as anyone else that lives in the state of Utah!" Justice exclaimed. "The highway is a disaster!" The crowd erupted into applause, drowning out Leavitt as he tried to respond.

But the room grew ghostly silent when Connie Voorhees spoke. Voorhees sat in a wheelchair, holding a photograph of her husband and daughter as she told the story of a February day the year before.

"My husband touched our brake. That was all it took. It threw our car on black ice into a semi that spun us around, and then the truck behind us hit us also," Voorhees began. The family was slowly driving a steep and narrow section of Highway 6 in a canyon just outside of Price. "We were all seat-belted and driving carefully," Voorhees said.

Her husband was killed instantly. The crash left her bones shattered: her pelvis, foot, leg, ribs and arm all broken.

"My husband's body went in the back seat and landed on my daughter," Voorhees said. "She just lay there with her father's broken body, with parts of him that she should never have to see, laying on her for two hours until they could get her out of the car."

Voorhees said that a grandson serving in Iraq was “safer than my grandchildren that drive back and forth on that mountain.”

Leavitt offered sympathy and a moment of prayerful silence.

And he said he would devote \$80 million to making Highway 6 safer.

“I’d like you to know that your message has been heard,” the governor said softly. “And that all that can be done will be.”

‘I Drive Hwy 6. Pray For Me’

Some in the crowd were not convinced. They’d already spent several frustrating years trying to get state officials to do something about Highway 6. They saw \$1.5 billion in highway funds siphoned from the rest of the state for an interstate reconstruction project in Salt Lake City in advance of the 2002 Winter Olympics, even though the project had no direct link to the games.

Mark Justice’s wife, Kathy, also attended the meeting. Looking back, she blames the failure to respond on politics. “You know, there’s not a lot of voters down here,” she says.

Kathy Justice launched an effort to make Highway 6 safer after three decades of attending funerals for crash victims. Her own mother died in an accident in 1971 at a tapered and winding section called Red Narrows.

Retired coal miner Bert Collins joined the effort. He’d lost three close family members on Highway 6.

“They were giving us the runaround,” Collins says. “The roads were being built upstate. They had the Olympic road-building extravaganza. [But] nothing down here.”

Jerry Donaldson, a highway safety expert with a Washington-based group called Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, asserts that highways that need money the most are “the ones that will usually get the least.”

“The reason is because you put your money where you already have a higher-type highway with higher traffic volumes serving a more densely populated area,” Donaldson says. “And the highways that are underfunded and have gone for decades without any real design improvements for safety, they remain in that condition.”

In 2007, rural highways received a third of federal highway funds, according to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation officials. That may seem like a good deal since rural America has about a quarter of the nation’s population, but close to 60 percent of traffic deaths occur on rural roads.

In Utah, Highway 6 was built 60 years ago, but its design and alignment haven’t changed much. Crash data indicate that a combination of driver error and road design is responsible for accidents. In the past 13 years, most fatal and serious accidents occurred on dry pavement under clear skies, meaning weather and wet, snow-covered or icy pavement were not to blame. Speeding is fairly common, but fatigue, driving under the influence and collisions with animals were factors in very few serious crashes. Most involved “roadway departure,” which means driving off the road or into oncoming traffic.

Kathy Justice and Collins and dozens of neighbors gathered 12,000 signatures on petitions presented to the governor. They placed dozens of white crosses along Highway 6 where friends and family had been killed or injured. They attracted international media attention. And they greeted Highway 6 drivers at a rest area with bumper stickers that said, "I Drive Hwy 6 - Utah. Pray for me."

State Rep. Brad King worked the halls of the state Legislature. "Highway 6 was kind of the No. 2 project for all of the legislators," King recalls. "They always said, 'We really need to take care of Highway 6 right after we take care of that project that's most important to my constituents.' "

### The Road To Improvements

The organizing efforts, embarrassing publicity and devastating death toll finally prompted state officials to act. In 2002, the year Leavitt pledged \$80 million in safety improvements, Utah began a series of ambitious and costly projects to make Highway 6 safer.

Now, at one of the most dangerous canyon curves on Highway 6, massive bulldozers, backhoes and earthmovers are scraping away a mountainside so the road can be straightened and widened.

"We're literally moving the mountain at this location to straighten out the road," says John Leonard, an operations engineer for the Utah Department of Transportation, as he views the work at a former rest area called Tucker, 36 miles west of Price. "We're actually realigning this short section of road ... to provide a better alignment so that people will be able to drive it easier and hopefully eliminate those crashes that we've had over the last couple of years."

The project shows how challenging it can be to make a rural highway safer. Many roads parallel natural and man-made features that limit engineering options. At Tucker, the existing highway snakes along a river and railroad tracks. All three are framed by steep mountainsides. To fix the road, one of the slopes has to be shaved back hundreds of feet.

"It's an engineering challenge," Leonard says, "but also an environmental challenge, because there are many, many elements here that we want to maintain. We don't want to encroach on the river. We don't want to take hillsides out. It's a fine balance."

It's also expensive. Straightening and widening the road at Tucker will cost \$45 million. That's for four miles of highway.

And there are canyon challenges like that all across the 60-mile stretch of Highway 6 between Spanish Fork and Price. The road straightens considerably as it continues on to Green River, but that stretch is also dangerous because of narrow traffic lanes, high speeds, and a series of hills and valleys that limit sight distance.

Tucker is the toughest section tackled so far. An additional \$187 million has gone into relatively easier fixes, including adding lanes to 47 miles where the highway corridor is already wide enough. There are also now rumble strips gouged into the pavement along shoulders and center lanes, which warn drivers before they drift off the road or into oncoming traffic. New signs tell impatient drivers that passing lanes are close. And interactive electronic signs warn drivers when they head into curves too fast.

“We’ve committed significant resources to this roadway and will commit significant resources in the future to try to make this the safest road that we can,” Leonard says.

So far, the fixes seem to be working. The annual death rate has plummeted — from more than 20 fatalities 10 years ago to four last year. Some highway safety activists say the general drop in fatalities may be due to the fact that fewer people are driving fewer miles given high gas prices and the recession.

Still, the steep decline in fatalities on Highway 6 has activists there encouraged.

“That’s what gives us hope,” says Kathy Justice. “They are doing things now that they said 10 years ago would be impossible or not to expect in my lifetime.”

Justice and others in Utah want four lanes of traffic on the entire dangerous stretch of 120 miles, which is what the 2005 state-sponsored study recommended for maximum and lasting safety.

But state officials balked, because four lanes the whole way would cost nearly \$500 million more. And state highway officials say the narrow sections present significant engineering and environmental challenges, especially the Red Narrows section where Justice’s mother died close to 40 years ago. On Nov. 14, the latest Highway 6 fatality occurred in that same area.

Nationwide, rural highway fatalities have dropped 20 percent in the past decade. But the death disparity between rural and urban highways remains. Copyright 2009 National Public Radio