

Boosting speed limit involves more than switching signs

Taylor W. Anderson/Dylan J. Darling
The Bulletin

SALEM (AP) — Talked about by truckers and Oregon for years, higher speed limits are coming to rural highways such as U.S. Highway 97 in Central Oregon starting March next year.

Cars cruising on highways outside cities will soon legally be allowed to drive 65 mph and trucks at 60 mph, speeds that lawmakers and police acknowledge drivers are already traveling despite lower limits.

“I think it is a long time due because everyone drives that kind of speed anyway,” said Russ Boyett, of Spokane, Washington.

Boyett, a long-haul trucker bringing frozen food to California and fresh produce back, stopped Wednesday morning to fuel up at Gordy’s Truck Stop in La Pine. Driving for Peirone Produce Co., he’s on Highway 97 every other week.

Drivers like Boyett who travel rural Oregon highways will note a visible change in speed limits starting March 1, and another subtle change that has implications for police, judges and drivers.

While hiking speed limits might seem like a monotonous task to some, the Oregon Department of Transportation will spend the next seven months dealing with complexities that make up Oregon speed law.

“You think you can just go out and put a sticker on the old signs,” said Doug Bish, traffic engineering services unit manager with ODOT. “It doesn’t quite work that way.”

The signs ODOT puts up next year will don the words “speed limit.” Makes sense, right? It’s not that simple in Oregon, where there’s a difference between a sign that says “Speed 55” and one posted that says “Speed Limit 55.”

Speed limit signs on U.S. Highway 97 and 20 outside Bend and others across rural Oregon changed in House Bill 3402 will mark a change in highway policy that went largely unnoticed as the bill to raise the limits passed in the waning days of the Legislature.

Knowingly or not, Oregon drivers and police for decades have followed what’s known as the “basic rule,” which is a posted speed (not speed limit)

that drivers can follow or not based on the conditions.

A mix of state laws concerning the basic rule and speed limits makes it a bit complicated, but the basic rule essentially requires drivers to adapt to road, weather and other conditions and adjust speed accordingly for safety.

If a driver was traveling, say, 55 mph on an icy highway where the posted speed was 55 mph, a state trooper could issue a citation for violating the basic rule because the actual road conditions called for more caution.

The state adopted the basic rule when the U.S. still had a maximum speed limit law, which set highway speed limits at 55 mph, before it was repealed in 1995. Oregon drivers often cite the basic rule speed limit to justify speeding, said Troy Costales, ODOT’s traffic safety division manager.

But that’s not what the law allows, and members of an ODOT committee trying to make driving here safer are trying to change the law to change driver behavior, starting with the Central and Eastern Oregon highways that will allow higher speeds next

year.

All new signs will advertise maximum speed limits for cars and trucks, rather than signs simply advertising basic rule speeds.

Because many drivers who know about the basic rule think it allows them to speed during good weather, the new limits — which can bring higher fines for citations than the basic rule — may be an unwelcome surprise to lead-foots.

“When the federal limit went away, Oregon’s roads all the sudden became basic rule,” Costales said. “The interstates are (speed) limits, inside city limits are (speed) limits. Now these roads that are identified in (the new law) become limits.”

Jerome Cooper, on ODOT’s safety committee, said during a hearing Tuesday it was “ridiculous” that Oregon will maintain what some called a patchwork of speed laws across the state and that the Legislature didn’t create a uniform change from basic rule to speed limits. Several members of the committee said they were interested in phasing out basic rule statewide soon.

Other members of the

committee wondered how the state would alert drivers of the change. With seven months until ODOT starts putting up the new speed signs, the state will have to make sure law enforcement knows of the change as well.

And while basic rule intends to ensure drivers go slower than the posted speeds during inclement weather, for example, Sgt. Kyle Hove, with Oregon State Police in La Grande, said some troopers believe the rule also allows drivers to exceed the posted signs when conditions permit.

“For instance, if you’re driving at night between Cove and La Grande and you’re going 10 over, you know, there’s elk, deer; 70 mph is way too fast in a 55. Those are conditions when we would cite” for violation of basic rule, Hove said.

These are among issues ODOT is rooting out as it gears up for a change that was widely welcomed by rural Oregon drivers, truckers and lawmakers who said Eastern Oregon drivers were punished by some of the slowest speed limits in the nation despite having far fewer drivers than the Willamette Valley.

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