

U.S. speed limits are creeping higher

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.06.15

Word Count **890**

Level **1060L**



An 80 mile-per-hour (mph) sign at dusk in southern Utah on Dec. 9, 2014. Each year, excessive speed contributes to one-third of highway deaths nationally. John M. Glionna/Los Angeles Times/TNS

LEEDS, Utah — For drivers passing through Leeds on Interstate 15, there’s not much reason to stop. There are views of Utah’s red-rock hills, but not much else.

Still, there is something exciting for drivers just outside Leeds: a chance to go faster. Just north of Leeds, the speed limit changes from 75 to 80 miles per hour (mph). The limit stays at 80 mph for 250 more miles.

The suggestion is clear for drivers: give in to the need for speed while passing through this desert landscape.

Rising And Falling Gas Prices

In the 1970s, the United States faced high gasoline prices because of periods without enough gas. This led to the “Drive 55” movement, which lowered speed limits around the country.

Today, gas prices are affordable and cars have become more fuel efficient. The changes encourage some to zoom.

“I go 5 miles per hour over the limit,” said bartender Tony Bonny of St. George, Utah. “But as soon as I see that 80 sign, my foot gets just a little bit heavier.”

Speed limits are rising all over the country, especially in wide-open Western states. The changes reflect the fast-paced lifestyle of Americans today.

Higher Speed-Limit Dangers

Many safety officials believe higher speeds will lead to a greater number and more horrifying crashes on the roads.

One-third of all highway deaths each year are caused, at least in part, by speeding.

Research shows the dangers of raising speed limits, said Russ Rader of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a group that works to reduce car crashes. “Higher speed limits get people to their destinations faster, but there’s always a cost: Ultimately, there will be more severe crashes and more deaths on those roads.”

Thirteen states have increased speed limits since 2005. They include Georgia, Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, Kentucky and Ohio. Most of those have set the highest limits at 70 or 75 mph.

But in the West, officials have taken things further. This year, Idaho and Wyoming raised their top speeds to 80 mph on some stretches of highway.

Lawmakers in Montana are considering an 85 mph top speed in some areas. Texas currently has the fastest highways in the country, with 85 mph speed limits in some places.

Need For More Speed

A 5-mile-per-hour change may not seem like much. It only cuts two hours from a cross-country drive. Still, state officials say they are not encouraging people to go faster — just changing the limits to match the speeds people already drive.

One highway safety expert blames the newest need for speed on “simple peer pressure.”

“When your neighbor increases its speed to 80, there’s pressure to do the same,” said Kara Macek of the Governors Highway Safety Association. “Motorists are giving in to the need to get everywhere quickly — especially out West, where it takes forever to get places.”

Utah officials say that highway crashes have decreased on parts of Interstate 15 where they raised the speed limit to 80 mph. A 2009 study showed that more drivers were following the new limit.

This month, Utah raised the speed limit from 65 mph to 70 mph on interstates around Salt Lake City, the state’s capital. Highway officials say the higher speed limit makes the roads more predictable, hurrying slower drivers.

“The idea is to provide consistency,” said John Gleason of the Utah Department of Transportation. “We really don’t think we’re changing the speed that most people drive — we’re changing the legal limit to reflect speeds they’re already doing.”

"This Is The Way We Roll"

National safety experts have criticized raising limits on roads shared by walkers, bicyclists and public transportation. Officials applauded New York City's recent move to lower the speed limit on city streets from 30 mph to 25 mph to reduce pedestrian deaths.

"About 10,000 Americans die every year in crashes that are related to speed," Rader said. "It's too many."

Still, many are now enjoying the new freedoms offered by faster highway speeds.

"The 80 mph speed limit is symbolic of my individuality and freedom," Robert Ehlert of the Idaho Statesman newspaper wrote. "This is the West. This is the way we roll."

At a gas station popular with travelers outside Leeds, truck driver Jake Hansen stopped for coffee and a bathroom break. Able to drive 80 mph instead of 75, he was not in as much of a rush.

"It does make a difference — I can get ahead of schedule," said 26-year-old Hansen, who was hauling a load of steel beams for an apartment building in Salt Lake City. "You get there faster; you unload faster."

Police, Truckers Speak Out

The trucking industry is against higher speeds. The American Trucking Association has called for a 65 mph national limit and "governors" on trucks — devices that limit how fast the trucks can go.

"Our guys are out there on the road every day," said Sean McNally, a spokesman for the association. "We know speed increases risk and crash severity."

Police from the Utah Highway Patrol have also spoken out against higher speeds.

"We're not in favor of raising the speed limits because we're out there on the road scenes of fatal accidents," Sergeant Todd Royce, a highway patrol spokesman, said. "We know what happens when you crash at those speeds."

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Rising and Falling Gas Prices." Which paragraph contains the main idea of that section?
- 2 According to the article, why was the "Drive 55" movement created?
 - (A) To reduce the number of highway deaths.
 - (B) To raise the speed limit by 5 mph.
 - (C) Because gas was in short supply and gas prices went up.
 - (D) Because gas prices became more affordable and cars were getting more fuel efficient.
- 3 Read the selection "Need For More Speed." Which of the following sentences supports the argument to raise the speed limit to 80 mph in western states like Utah?
 - (A) One highway safety expert blames the newest need for speed on "simple peer pressure."
 - (B) Utah officials say that highway crashes have decreased on parts of Interstate 15 where they raised the speed limit to 80 mph.
 - (C) This month, Utah raised the speed limit from 65 mph to 70 mph on interstates around Salt Lake City, the state's capital.
 - (D) One highway safety expert blames the newest need for speed on "simple peer pressure."
- 4 What is one reason why the American Trucking Association wants to lower the speed limit?
 - (A) They are concerned about the safety of their truck drivers.
 - (B) They are worried that speeds will increase even more in the next ten years.
 - (C) They are worried about minor car crashes.
 - (D) To decrease the amount of time their drivers are on the road.