

1 of New Mexico's deadliest highways gets beefed up patrols

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JAL, N.M. (AP) — On any given day, there are around 6,000 vehicles on New Mexico Highway 128 west of Jal. More than 4,000 of those were driving over the speed limit, some in excess of 100 mph (161 kph).

That's why the 50-mile (81-kilometer) stretch of highway is close to being designated a New Mexico Safety Corridor.

"A safety corridor doubles the fines for speed, reckless driving, any kind of moving violation," Capt. Lance Bateman, Roswell-based commander for this state police district.

"It also gets more exposure and more attention."

Multiple fatalities on the oilfield access road garnered state attention in July, especially, and in recent years, with the New Mexico Department of Transportation conducting a traffic study in August that determined the number of vehicles on that highway.

After five weeks of a state police concentrated effort in New Mexico's southern Lea County, during which 2,342 citations were written Bateman called "Operation Arrive Alive" a success.

During a Wednesday morning ride-along south on NM 18, west on NM 128 and north on Delaware Basin Road as the crackdown neared its conclusion, the Hobbs News-Sun interviewed Bateman.

Bateman said nine officers from other New Mexico State Police districts — Deming, Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Clovis and Las Vegas — volunteered to participate in the operation intended to stop the fatal crashes in southern Lea County.

In addition, officers from Bateman's district and the Lea County Sheriff's Office cooperated to encourage safer driving in the area.

"In the five weeks we've been doing this, we've only had one traffic fatality and it was actually in Eddy County," Bateman said. "It was on a Saturday when we weren't running

the operation, so we think we've seen some success with this. We're going to continue it."

Data provided after the operation ended shows 2,260 traffic stops, 1,087 vehicle inspections, 52 drivers put out of service, 198 vehicles put out of service, 20 non-injury crashes, 16 crashes with injuries and zero fatalities during the five weeks.

Drivers put out of service means NMSP officers found these drivers were without a commercial driver's license or were otherwise not qualified to drive a commercial vehicle.

In addition, there were 29 arrests, including 26 misdemeanors, one felony and two DWIs.

Faced with continued fatal accidents during the summer, Bateman contacted Chief Engineer Tim Parker of the NMDOT to recommend the safety corridor designation. Lea County Sheriff Corey Helton also had pushed for the safety corridor and the state police worked with the sheriff in their mutual concerns about the fatalities.

"The NMDOT ran it up their chain of command and state road 128 is going to become a safety corridor in mid-October," Bateman said.

Southbound on the Eunice Highway, or NM 18, the captain pulled his vehicle to the side behind another state police unit involved in a traffic stop.

Officer Jordan Romero of the Hobbs-based state police office stopped a man for driving 89 mph in a 65 mph zone. At the driver's request, Bateman spent a few minutes talking with the driver while Romero paused to answer a News-Sun request for advice for drivers.

"Even if you're running late, there's no point in speeding. You'll get there when you get there," Romero said. "You're not really saving much time by speeding. Keep yourself safe and avoid a ticket. With all these accidents down here, it's really not worth it."

He paused, then added, "There have just been too many accidents on 128, people in a hurry passing others, one semi passing another semi."

Bateman, upon returning to his vehicle and resuming the trip south, said the driver actually had no complaint but wanted to express appreciation for the crackdown and for the professionalism Romero showed. The citation will cost him well close to \$200.

Bateman said the urban legend about a 5 mph or 10 mph grace given for speeders is just a myth.

"Right now, my directive to the officers down here is zero tolerance. So, if they see them violating the law, speed-wise and such, no warnings are to be given," Bateman said.

"They will be giving citations because of all the issues we're having on the road. Officers elsewhere have the leeway. It's their own discretion."

He said in his career the tightest he has seen it was a citation for speeding two miles per hour over the speed limit.

Midday on a Wednesday found NM 128 traffic heavy, but still lighter than early morning or late afternoon traffic as lines of vehicles rolled east and west, most of it to keep New Mexico in the oil and gas business.

"Our guys are out here hitting it at 4 a.m. and running until late at night. A lot of these officers on this project are working 12-to 16-hour days. They're pretty focused on the problem and, so far, doing a great job," Bateman said.

On Delaware Road, about 21 miles west of Jal, Bateman pulled over behind a parked state police unit to introduce Sgt. Leonard Brake from the Clovis district.

"During this operation, this is Sgt. Brake's second time down here. Sgt. Brake and a lot of people volunteered for it and they make a difference," Bateman said.

"It's nice to see the difference," Brake said, noting the traffic seems to have slowed since the operation began.

Asked what advice he would give drivers, Brake said, "Be real cautious of the other traffic and pay attention. Speed and cell phones are everything out here."

Bateman said the safety corridor designation will increase signage on NM 128 to urge safe travel, but some signs already have been installed.

"There is electric signage out there: Don't Text, Slow Down, Arrive Alive," Bateman said.

"I thought that was a good slogan, so I named this operation: Operation Arrive Alive.

That's the goal to make everyone safe to get home to their families every night. . This is a lot of traffic for a two-lane road."

Although turning lanes are in the works, and possibly passing lanes, there is little chance of increasing the highway to a four-lane road, he said, because of engineering issues and cost.

One mile of a single lane costs \$1-2 million, and NM 128 is just over 50 miles long.

Also, when the same proposal was made for NM 285 south of Loving in Eddy County, engineers found too many sinkholes to allow for safe construction of additional lanes.

"The same is probably true of 128," Bateman said.

However, the NMDOT designated NM 285 from Loving to the Texas state line a safety corridor in March 2018.

"Knock on wood, we haven't seen a fatality in that stretch since February 2018. It's worked, and our crashes have dropped significantly," Bateman said.

He pointed out the primary issues are caused by impatience of some drivers trying to pass slower vehicles, some drivers talking or texting on a cell phone and some drivers paying more attention to their GPS system than the traffic on the road.

"I hate to say it, but we can put up all the billboards we want about saving lives, but, really, people don't change their behavior until it hurts their pocketbook," Bateman said. He hopes the safety corridor designation, with increased patrols, will continue to keep drivers coming home to their families every night, arriving alive.

Information from: Hobbs News-Sun, <http://www.hobbsnews.com>