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County motorcycle deaths drop in 2009

By BRAD DICKERSON

Highlands Today

Florida's weather gives motorcycle enthusiasts virtually 365 days every year to take off on the open roads.

Marianne Trussell, chief safety officer for the Florida Department of Transportation, thinks that weather is a big reason the state has so many bikers.

"You can ride every day and you've got the opportunity, and they like to get out there and ride," she said.

With all those bikers on the roadways, the chances for accidents are greater. Fortunately, the number of Florida motorcycle fatalities dropped 24 percent in 2009 after a decade of steep increases.

These declines mirror a national trend. In 2009, motorcycle fatalities went down 10 percent nationally after 11 years on the rise. States other than Florida also had dramatic decreases: California went down 29 percent; New York, 16 percent.

In 2009, Highlands County had its lowest number of motorcycle deaths in five years. Two people were killed in motorcycle-related accidents last year, compared to seven in 2008, according to information from the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FDHSMV).

In 2005, the Heartland registered three motorcycle-related fatalities, followed by five in 2006 and three in 2007.

"The decrease in motorcycle deaths is a very positive trend, especially during a large increase in motorcycle traffic," said Florida Highway Patrol Lt. Chris Miller via e-mail. "While the exact reason/reasons is unknown, safety and public awareness campaigns have certainly contributed."

As for motorcycle-related injuries in Highlands County, there were 32 in 2009, according to FDHSMV records. That was up significantly from the 21 registered in 2008, but down from the five-year peak of 43 in 2006.

Getting the word out

In 2009, volunteers from motorcycle clubs, the FDHSMV, law enforcement and insurance agencies formed a coalition to promote motorcycle safety, according to Trussell.

"Everybody's got to look out for everybody," she said.

One of the campaigns they promote is "Look Twice, Save a Life," an initiative that encourages drivers behind the wheel to check for motorcycles.

"The most common fatal crash involving motorcycles is a vehicle turning in front of an oncoming motorcycle," Miller said. "Motorists should always look specifically for motorcycles before entering the roadway."

While it might not be enforced, more and more riders are starting to understand that helmets are vital when riding a motorcycle, Trussell said.

As it stands, there are no laws in Florida that require a rider to wear a helmet

There are laws on the books, however, to make sure motorcycle enthusiasts have a good understanding of how the vehicle works before taking to the road.

FHP Capt. Mark Welch credits legislation implemented in July 2008 that requires new motorcycle riders to take a course before being allowed on the roadways with helping to decrease the number fatalities.

For riders who decide to test the limits of the bikes, enhanced penalties may be in order, according to Welch.

Florida statutes pertaining to motorcycles say both wheels must stay on the ground, a rule against those who want to "pop wheelies," Welch said.

And if a driver is clocked going 50 miles over the posted speed limit, the fine comes out to \$1,000.

"That's for anybody that goes in excess of 50 miles an hour over the posted speed limit," Welch said.

David Rich

From: Lockdown [statepr@abateflorida.com]
Sent: Tuesday, July 20, 2010 9:09 PM
To: 'rhensley@highlandstoday.com'
Cc: 'fdot@dot.state.fl.us'
Subject: RE: "County motorcycle deaths drop in 2009", Printed in Highlands Today 7/19/10, page 1.

Importance: High

Richard Hensley, Editor
Highlands Today Newspaper

July 20, 2010

Mr. Hensley,

My attention has been called to Brad Dickerson's "County Motorcycle Deaths Drop in 2009" article, printed in *Highlands Today* on 7/19/10.

Although much of the information is correct in the article, it was incorrect in stating there has been a decade of steep increases in motorcyclists' deaths in Florida. As a matter of fact, Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FL DHSMV) reported no increase or decrease of deaths in 2007, and a 3.3% decrease in 2008. With almost 700,000 registered motorcycles in Florida, every bit of a percentage point representing a decrease of deaths is important.

ABATE of Florida, Inc. and our over 7,500 members are excited to hear of the 24.4% decrease in motorcyclists' deaths reported in 2009. This may very well mean that our partially state-funded Motorcycle Safety and Awareness Program (MSAP) may be showing signs of successful impact. However, we are disappointed by unfounded comment Marianne Trussell stated regarding helmet use.

Ms. Trussell's printed statement "... more and more riders are starting to understand that helmets are vital when riding a motorcycle," appears to be unfounded, requiring ABATE of Florida, Inc. to respectfully disagree with her. We have not seen or heard of any empirically-qualified study taken place in Florida which suggests the Chief Safety Officer for the Florida Department of Transportation's statement is based on fact.

We will not debate the effectiveness of helmet use in a head-trauma-related motorcycle accident. Although the December 2009 NHTSA's *Traffic Safety Facts Research Note* (DOT HS 811 254) states in a questionable study that helmet use is on the rise nationwide, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's report also admits that they estimate helmets are only "37% effective in preventing fatal injuries to motorcycle riders". Their study, the only one of its kind, specifically did not stop any motorcyclists to question their reasons for wearing or not wearing a helmet.

Additionally, the FL DHSMV reports that of all fatal motorcycle accidents in Florida in 2009, 53.23% of the riders and passengers WERE wearing helmets. Even though we regret any motorcycle-related deaths, the numbers cited here do not lead to any indication of individual motorcyclists' thoughts or opinions.

Without an empirical study to base her statement on, we welcome Ms. Trussell to revise her statement to being one of her own opinion, and not one of the unknown opinion of all motorcyclists in Florida.

Sincerely,

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cc: Stephanie C. Kopelousos, Florida Secretary of Transportation